The Paris Review

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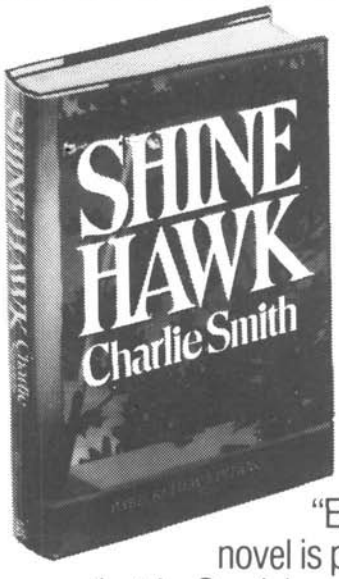

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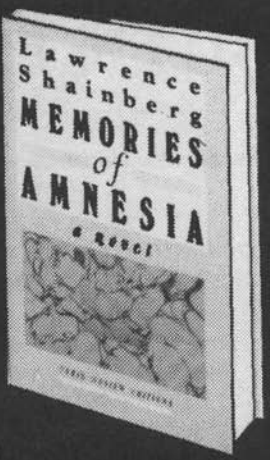

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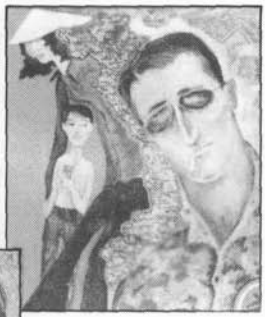

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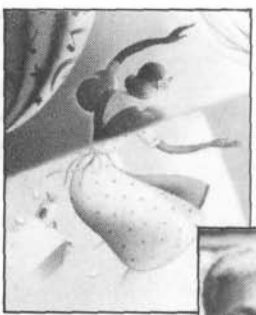

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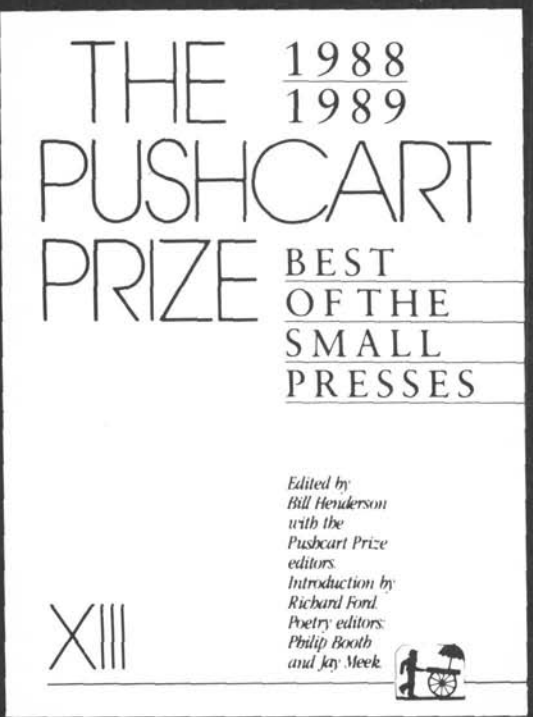

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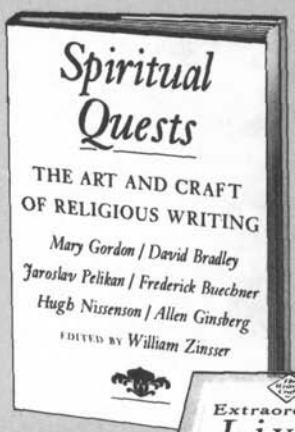
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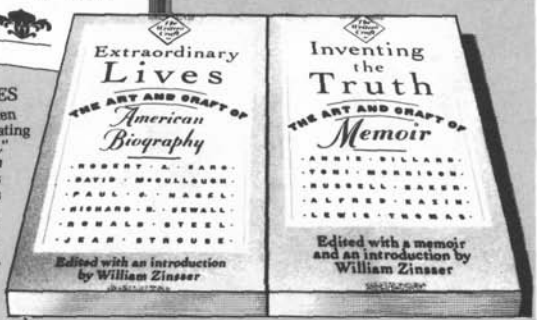

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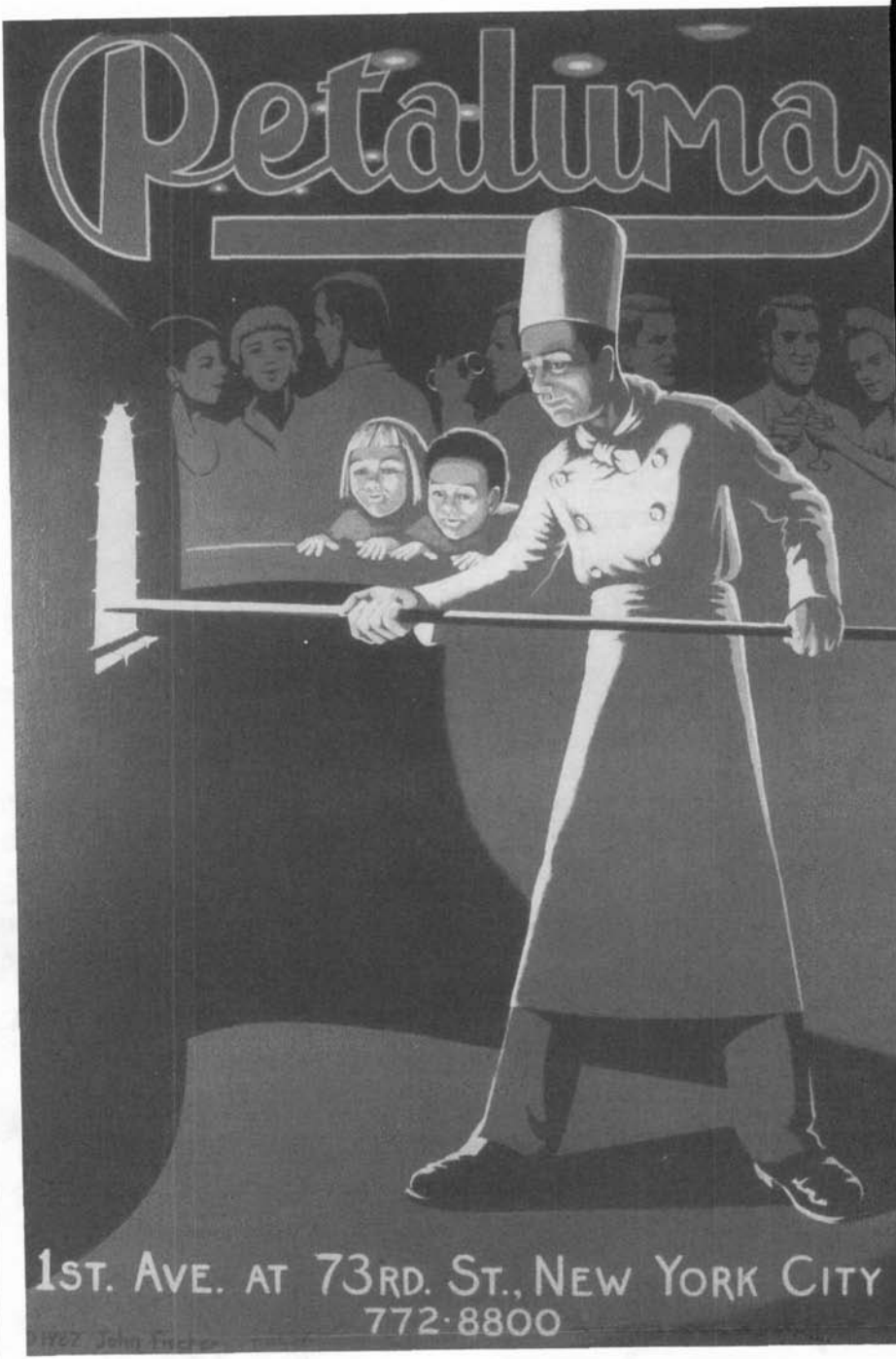

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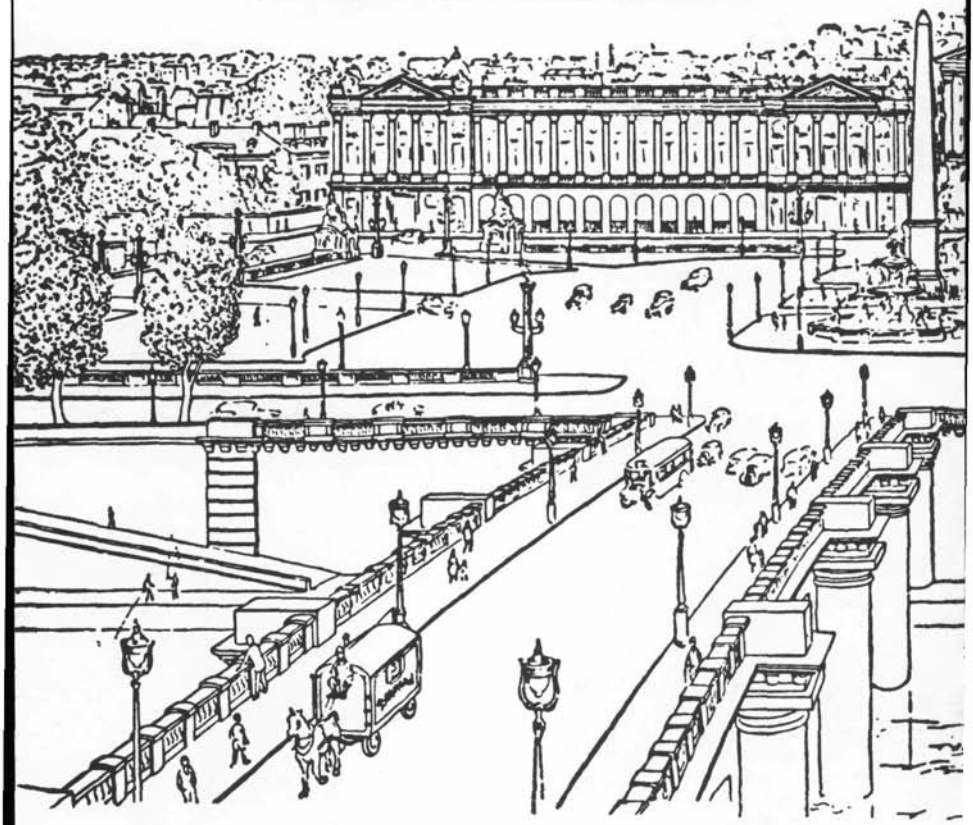

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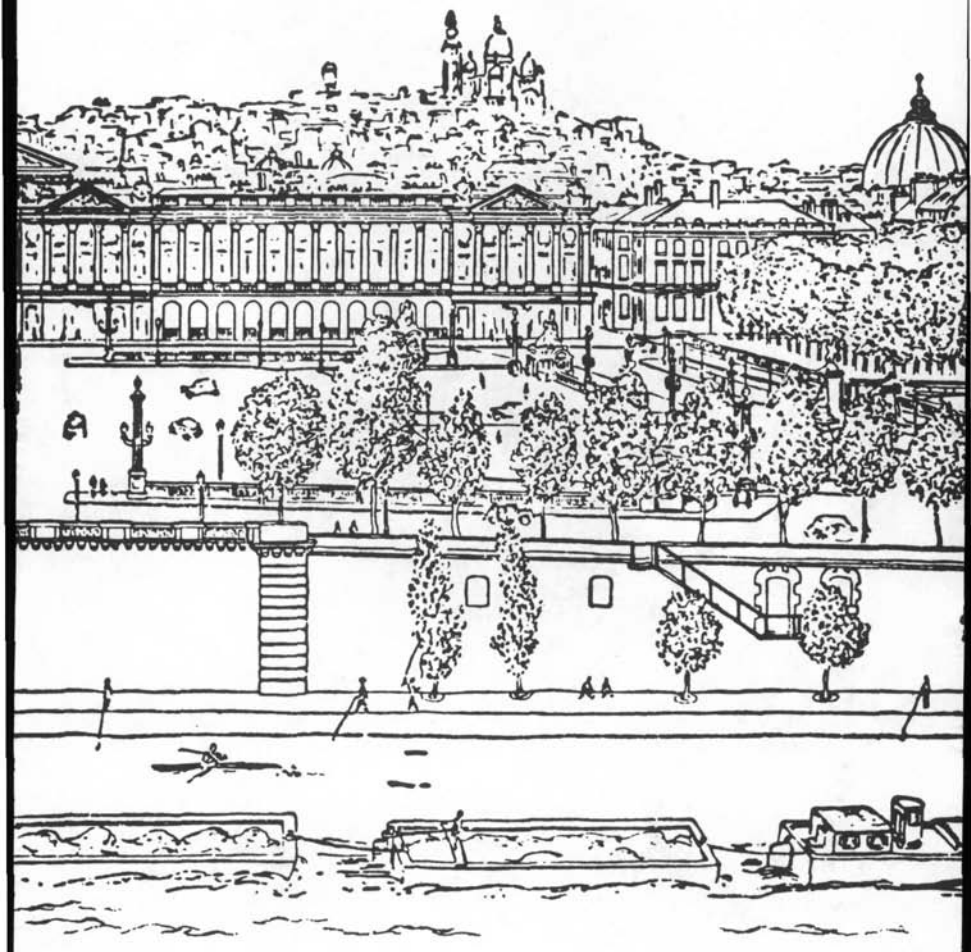

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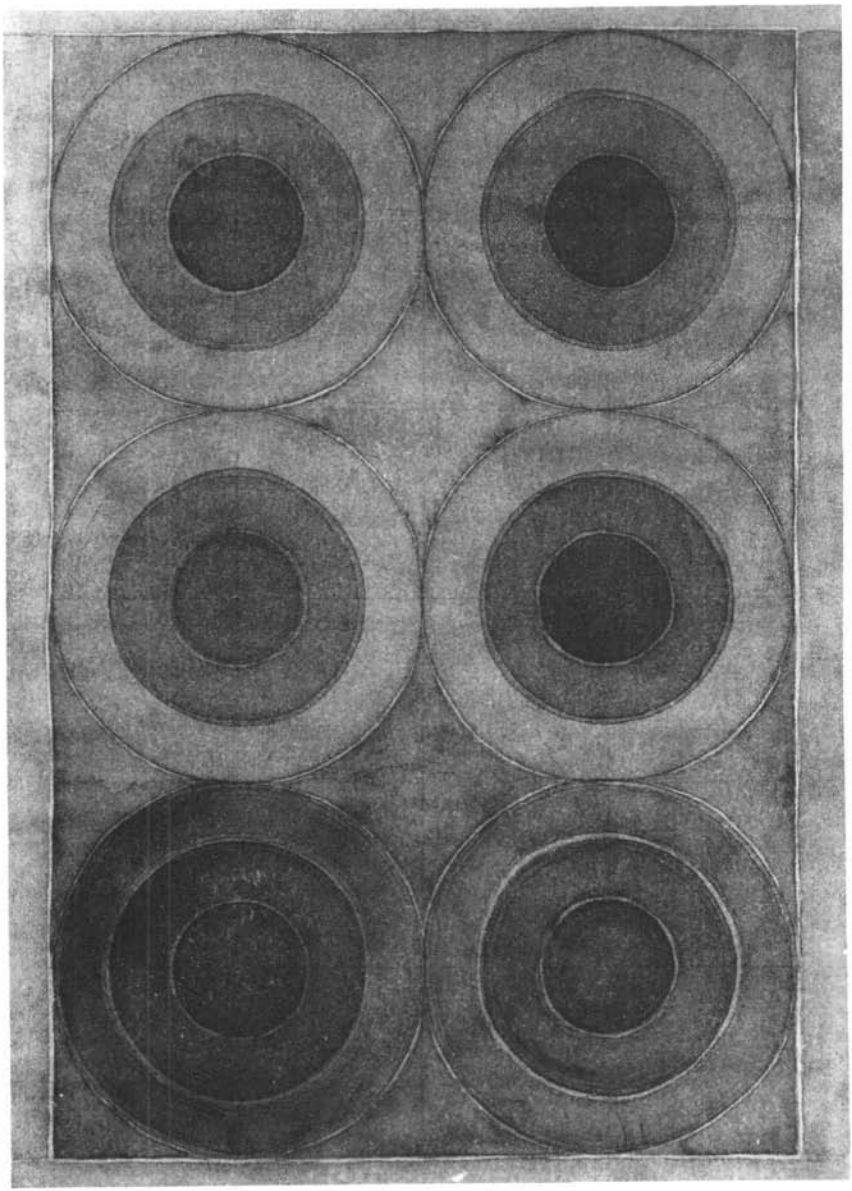

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Number 109

Interviews

John Mortimer	*The Art of Fiction CVI*	96
Tom Stoppard	*The Art of Theatre VII*	26

Fiction

William S. Burroughs	*Twilight's Last Gleamings*	12
Ron Hansen	*Sleepless*	136
Susan Minot	*The Man Who Would Not Go Away*	76
Hiram Moody	*Twister*	60

Art

Robert Gober	*Six Drawings*	81

Poetry

Thomas Bolt	*1971 Pontiac LeMans*	59
Catherine Bowman	*Two Poems*	129
Hayden Carruth	*Two Poems*	133
Clayton Eshleman	*The Night Against Its Lit Elastic*	73
Arthur Gold	*1944*	58
Jane Hirshfield	*Three Poems*	54
Harry Mathews	*Condo Auction*	64
Bruce Murphy	*Estuary, Sunday Evening*	135
Joyce Carol Oates	*Three Poems*	88
B. A. St. Andrews	*On Witnessing Open-Heart Surgery*	52
Charles Simic	*Five Poems*	21
C. D. Wright	*Two Poems*	91

Notes on Contributors 154

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Twilight's Last Gleamings

William S. Burroughs

PLEASE IMAGINE AN EXPLOSION ON A SHIP.

A paretic named Perkins sat askew on his broken wheelchair. He arranged his lips.

"You pithyathed thon of a bidth!" he shouted.

Barbara Cannon, a second-class passenger, lay naked in a first-class bridal suite with Steward Lindy Adams. Lindy got out of bed and walked over to a window and looked out.

"Put on your clothes, honey," he said. "There's been an accident."

A first-class passenger named Mrs. Norris was thrown out of bed by the explosion. She lay there shrieking until her maid came and helped her up.

"Bring me my wig and my kimono," she told the maid. "I'm going to see the Captain."

Dr. Benway, ship's doctor, drunkenly added two inches to a four-inch incision with one stroke of his scalpel.

"There was a little scar, Doctor," said the nurse, who was

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peering over his shoulder. "Perhaps the appendix is already out."

"The appendix *out*!" the doctor shouted. "*I'm* taking the appendix out! What do you think I'm doing here?"

"Perhaps the appendix is on the left side," said the nurse. "That happens sometimes, you know."

"Can't you be quiet?" said the doctor. "I'm coming to that!" He threw back his elbows in a movement of exasperation. "Stop breathing down my neck!" he yelled. He thrust a red fist at her. "And get me another scalpel. This one has no edge to it."

He lifted the abdominal wall and searched along the incision. "I know where an appendix is. I studied appendectomy in 1904 at Harvard."

The floor tilted from the force of the explosion. The doctor reeled back and hit the wall.

"Sew her up!" he said, peeling off his gloves. "I can't be expected to work under such conditions!"

At a table in the bar sat Christopher Hitch, a rich liberal; Colonel Merrick, retired; Billy Hines of Newport; and Joe Bane, writer.

"In all my experience as a traveler," the Colonel was saying, "I have never encountered such service."

Billy Hines twisted his glass, watching the ice cubes. "Frightful service," he said, his face contorted by a suppressed yawn.

"Do you think the Captain controls this ship?" said the Colonel, fixing Christopher Hitch with a bloodshot blue eye.

"Unions!" shouted the Colonel. "Unions control this ship!"

Hitch gave out with a laugh that was supposed to be placating but ended up oily.

"Things aren't so bad, really," he said, patting at the Colonel's arm. He didn't land the pat because the Colonel drew his arm out of reach. "Things will adjust themselves."

Joe Bane looked up from his drink of straight rye.

"It's like I say, Colonel," he said. "A man—"

The table left the floor and the glasses crashed. Billy Hines

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remained seated, looking blankly at the spot where his glass had been. Christopher Hitch rose uncertainly. Joe Bane jumped up and ran away.

"By God!" said the Colonel. "I'm not surprised!"

Also at a table in the bar sat Philip Bradshinkel, investment banker, his wife Joan Bradshinkel, Branch Morton, a St. Louis politician, and Morton's wife, Mary Morton. The explosion knocked their table over.

Joan raised her eyebrows in an expression of sour annoyance. She looked at her husband and sighed.

"I'm sorry this happened, dear," said her husband. "Whatever it is, I mean."

Mary Morton said, "Well I declare!"

Branch Morton stood up, pushing back his chair with a large red hand.

"Wait here," he said, "I'll find out."

Mrs. Norris pushed through a crowd on C Deck. She rang the elevator bell and waited. She rang again and waited. After five minutes she walked up to A Deck.

The Negro orchestra, high on marijuana, remained seated after the explosion. Branch Morton walked over to the orchestra leader.

"Play the Star Spangled Banner," he ordered.

The orchestra leader looked at him.

"What you say?" he asked.

"You black baboon, play the Star Spangled Banner on your horn!"

"Contract don't say nothing 'bout no Star Spangled Banner," said a thin Negro in spectacles.

"This old boat am swinging on down!" someone in the orchestra yelled, and the orchestra jumped down off the platform and scattered among the passengers.

Branch Morton walked over to a juke box in a corner of the saloon. He saw "The Star-Spangled Banner" by Fats Waller.

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He put in a handful of quarters. The machine clicked and buzzed and began to play:

"OH SAY CAN YOU? YES YES"

Joe Bane fell against the door of his stateroom and plunged in. He threw himself on the bed and drew his knees up to his chin. He began to sob.

His wife sat on the bed and talked to him in a gentle hypnotic voice. "You can't stay here, Joey. This bed is going underwater. You can't stay here."

Gradually the sobbing stopped and Bane sat up. She helped him put on a life belt. "Come along," she said.

"Yes, honeyface," he said, and followed her out the door.

"AND THE HOME OF THE BRAVE"

Mrs. Norris found the door to the Captain's cabin ajar. She pushed it open and stepped in, knocking on the open door. A tall, thin, red-haired man with horn-rimmed glasses was sitting at a desk littered with maps. He glanced up without speaking.

"Oh Captain, is the ship sinking? Someone set off a bomb, they said. I'm Mrs. Norris—you know, Mr. Norris, shipping business. Oh the ship *is* sinking! I know, or you'd say something. Captain, you will take care of us? My maid and me?" She put out a hand to touch the Captain's arm. The ship listed suddenly, throwing her heavily against the desk. Her wig slipped.

The Captain stood up. He snatched the wig off her head and put it on.

"Give me that kimono!" he ordered.

Mrs. Norris screamed. She started for the door. The Captain took three long, springy strides and blocked her way. Mrs. Norris rushed for a window, screaming. The Captain took a revolver from his side pocket. He aimed at her bald pate outlined in the window, and fired.

"You God-damned old fool," he said. "Give me that kimono!"

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Philip Bradshinkel walked up to a sailor with his affable smile.

"Room for the ladies on this one?" he asked, indicating a lifeboat.

The sailor looked at him sourly.

"No!" said the sailor. He turned away and went on working on the launching davit.

"Now wait a minute," said Bradshinkel. "You can't mean that. Women and children first, you know."

"Nobody goes on this lifeboat but the crew," said the sailor.

"Oh, I understand," said Bradshinkel, pulling out a wad of bills.

The sailor snatched the money.

"I thought so," said Bradshinkel. He took his wife by the arm and started to help her into the lifeboat.

"Get that old meat outa here!" screamed the sailor.

"But you made a bargain! You took my money!"

"Oh for Chrissakes," said the sailor. "I just took your dough so it wouldn't get wet!"

"But my wife is a woman!"

Suddenly the sailor became very gentle.

"All my life," he said, "all my life I been a sucker for a classy dame. I seen 'em in the Sunday papers laying on the beach. Soft messy tits. They just lay there and smile dirty. Jesus they heat my pants!"

Bradshinkel nudged his wife. "Smile at him." He winked at the sailor, "What do you say?"

"Naw," said the sailor, "I ain't got time to lay her now."

"Later," said Bradshinkel.

"Later's no good. Besides she's special built for you. She can't give me no kids and she drinks alla time. Like I say, I just seen her in the Sunday papers and wanted her like a dog wants rotten meat."

"Let me talk to this man," said Branch Morton. He worked his fingers over the fleshy shoulder of his wife and pulled her under his armpit.

"This little woman is a mother," he said. The sailor blew his nose on the deck. Morton grabbed the sailor by the biceps.

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"In Clayton, Missouri, seven kids whisper her name through their thumbs before they go to sleep."

The sailor pulled his arm free. Morton dropped both hands to his side, palms facing forward.

"As man to man," he was pleading. "As man to man."

Two Negro musicians, their eyes gleaming, came up behind the two wives. One took Mrs. Morton by the arm, the other took Mrs. Bradshinkel.

"Can us have dis dance witchu?"

"THAT OUR FLAG WAS STILL THERE"

Captain Kramer, wearing Mrs. Norris's kimono and wig, his face heavily smeared with cold cream, and carrying a small suitcase, walked down to C Deck, the kimono billowing out behind him. He opened the side door to the Purser's office with a pass key. A thin-shouldered man in a Purser's uniform was stuffing currency and jewels into a suitcase in front of an open safe.

The Captain's revolver swung free of his brassiere and he fired twice.

"SO GALLANTLY STREAMING"

Finch, the radio operator, washed down bicarbonate of soda and belched into his hand. He put the glass down and went on tapping out S.O.S.

"S.O.S....S.S. America...S.O.S....off Jersey coast...S.O.S....son of a bitching set...S.O.S....might smell us...S.O.S....son of a bitching crew...S.O.S....*Comrade* Finch...comrade in a pig's ass...S.O.S....Goddamned Captain's a brown artist...S.O.S....S.S. America...S.O.S....S.S. Crapbox...."

Lifting his kimono with his left hand, the Captain stepped in behind the radio operator. He fired one shot into the back of Finch's head. He shoved the small body aside and smashed the radio with a chair.

"O'ER THE RAMPARTS WE WATCH"

Dr. Benway, carrying his satchel, pushed through the passengers crowded around Lifeboat No. 1.

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"Are you all alright?" he shouted, seating himself among the women. "I'm the Doctor."

"BY THE ROCKET'S RED GLARE"

When the Captain reached Lifeboat No. 1 there were two seats left. Some of the passengers were blocking each other as they tried to force their way in, others were pushing forward a wife, a mother, or a child. The Captain shoved them all out of his way, leapt into the boat and sat down. A boy pushed through the crowd in the Captain's wake.

"Please," he said, "I'm only thirteen."

"Yes yes," said the Captain, "you can sit by me."

The boat started jerkily toward the water, lowered by four male passengers. A woman handed her baby to the Captain.

"Take care of my baby, for God's sake!"

Joe Bane landed in the boat and slithered noisily under a thwart. Dr. Benway cast off the ropes. The doctor and the boy started to row. The Captain looked back at the ship.

"OH SAY CAN YOU SEE"

A third-year divinity student named Titman heard Perkins in his stateroom yelling for his attendant. He opened the door and looked in.

"What do you want, thicken thit?" said Perkins.

"I want to help you," said Titman.

"Thtick it up and thwitht it!" said Perkins.

"Easy does it," said Titman, walking over towards the broken wheelchair. "Everything is going to be okey-dokey."

"Thneaked off!" Perkins put a hand on one hip and jerked the elbow forward in a grotesque indication of dancing. "Danthing with floothies!"

"We'll find him," said Titman, lifting Perkins out of the wheelchair. He carried the withered body in his arms like a child. As Titman walked out of the stateroom, Perkins snatched up a butcher knife used by his attendant to make sandwiches.

"Danthing with floothies!"

"BY THE DAWN'S EARLY LIGHT"

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A crowd of passengers was fighting around Lifeboat No. 7. It was the last boat that could be launched. They were using bottles, broken deck chairs, and fire axes. Titman, carrying Perkins in his arms, made his way through the fighting unnoticed. He placed Perkins in a seat at the stern.

"There you are," said Titman. "All set."

Perkins said nothing. He sat there, chin drawn back, eyes shining, the butcher knife clutched rigidly in one hand.

A hysterical crowd from second class began pushing from behind. A big-faced shoe clerk with long yellow teeth grabbed Mrs. Bane and shoved her forward. "Ladies first!" he yelled.

A wedge of men formed behind him and pushed. A shot sounded and Mrs. Bane fell forward, hitting the lifeboat. The wedge broke, rolling and scrambling. A man in an ROTC uniform with a .45 automatic in his hand stood by the lifeboat. He covered the sailor at the launching davit.

"Let this thing down!" he ordered.

As the lifeboat slid down towards the water, a cry went up from the passengers on deck. Some of them jumped into the water, others were pushed by the people behind.

"Let 'er go, God-damn it, let 'er go!" yelled Perkins.

"Throw him out!"

A hand rose out of the water and closed on the side of the boat. Springlike, Perkins brought the knife down. The fingers fell into the boat and the bloody stump of hand slipped back into the water.

The man with the gun was standing in the stern. "Get going!" he ordered. The sailors pulled hard on the oars.

Perkins worked feverishly, chopping on all sides. "Bathtardth, thonthabitheth!" The swimmers screamed and fell away from the boat.

"Thataboy."

"Don't let 'em swamp us."

"Atta boy, Comrade."

"Bathtardth, thonthabitheth! Bathtardth, thonthabitheth!"

"OH SAY DO DAT STAR SPANGLED BANNER YET WAVE"

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The Evening News

Miss Cannon showed your reporter her souvenirs of the disaster: a life belt autographed by the crew, and a severed human finger.

"I don't know," said Miss Cannon. "I feel sorta bad about this old finger."

"O'ER THE LAND OF THE FREE"

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Five Poems by Charles Simic

Weather of the Soul

It's raining, it's pouring,
And your heart is sad,
But you're not about to say it.

Enough rain to make the river overflow,
The nuns at the hospital
To take their mad in a rowboat.

If it eases a little, send the boy next door
For beer. Let him bring cigars too,
Under your big black umbrella.

His mother's beautiful when she smiles,
But she rarely does,
Even when she breast-feeds the baby.

You can't say "wild desire,"
And it's silly to say "I've been spooked
By the way she thinks with her eyes,"

Thinks and thinks . . .
And the rain makes a sound on the roof
Of bare feet and petticoats.

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Two Dogs

An old dog afraid of his own shadow
In some southern town . . .
The story told to me by a woman going blind . . .
One fine summer evening
As the shadows were creeping
Out of New Hampshire woods . . .
A long street with just a worried dog
And a couple of dusty chickens . . .
And all that sun beating down
In that nameless southern town.

* * *

It made me remember the Germans marching
Past our house in 1944.
The way everybody stood on the sidewalk
Watching them out of the corner of the eye.
The earth trembling, death going by . . .
A little white dog ran into the street
And got entangled with soldiers' feet.
A kick made him fly as if he had wings . . .
That's what I keep seeing!
Night coming down. A dog with wings.

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These Homemade Dolls Are No Good

Philosophers practicing their scissor-clips
In the dark,
So everything comes out
Needing an arm or a leg.

Still, if that's all you've got
To play with . . .
This one at least had a head,
And its lips were red!

Rain-streaked, dead-eyed frame houses
Lining the empty street
Where a child sat on the steps
In her flowered nightgown, talking to it.

She must've been cold.
They both must've been shivering,
And the first snowflakes glistening, glistening
In her black hair.

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Windy Evening

This old world needs propping up
When it gets this cold and windy.
The cleverly painted sets,
Oh, they're shaking!
They're about to come down.

There'll be nothing but infinite space.
The silence supreme, the silence almighty.
Bright sky. Many stars.
Graverobbers entering the crypt of the pharaohs.
Even the wind now pausing, waiting to see.

Better grab hold of that tree, Lucille.
Its shape crazed, terror-stricken.
I'll hold the barn.
The chickens in it uneasy.
Smart chickens, rickety world.

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Heights of Folly

All you crows out there,
I admit to being at times,
Suddenly, and without a slightest warning,
Exceedingly happy.

On a morning otherwise sunless,
Strolling arm in arm
Past some gallows-shaped trees
With my dear wife,
Who is also a strange bird,

With a feeling of being summoned,
Urgently and by a most gracious invitation
To breakfast on slices of watermelon
In company of naked gods and goddesses
On a patch of last night's snow.

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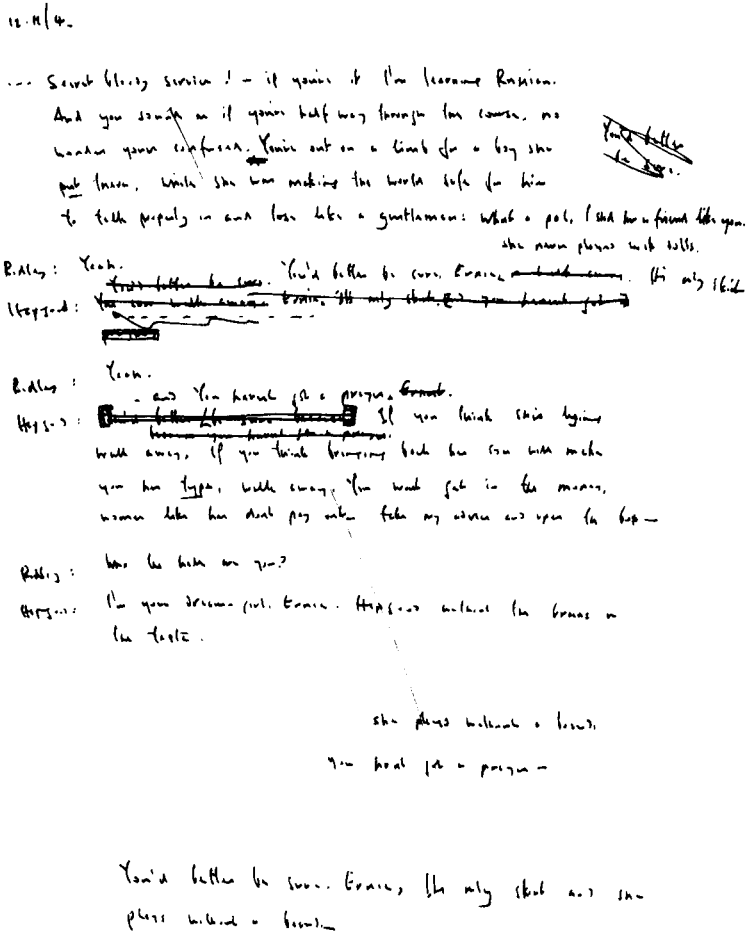

A manuscript page from Tom Stoppard's play Hapgood.

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Tom Stoppard

The Art of Theater VII

Tom Stoppard's first major play, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, *was staged at the Edinburgh Festival in 1966 by a group of Oxford students. A local reviewer dismissed it as "an off-putting piece of non-theater," but the drama critic of* The Observer *wrote, "This is erudite comedy, punning, far-fetched, leaping from depth to dizziness. It is the most brilliant debut by a young playwright." On his return to London Stoppard found a telegram from Kenneth Tynan, then the National Theatre's dramaturg, asking to see his play. Eight months later it was produced at the National to the highest critical and popular acclaim.*

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Since then, in addition to stage plays – including Jumpers, Travesties, Night and Day, The Real Thing *and* Hapgood – *he has written a number of radio and television plays, filmscripts and adaptations, and has become one of the world's best-known and most respected contemporary playwrights.*

Tom Stoppard was born Tomas Straussler in Zlin, now Gottwaldov, Czechoslovakia, in 1937. His father was a doctor who worked for a shoe company with offices all over the world. In 1938, such were the times, the company transferred families with Jewish blood out of Czechoslovakia, and the Strausslers went to Singapore. When the Japanese invasion of the island became imminent, the women and children were put on boats to Australia and to India. Tom and his elder brother and mother were sent to India. His father, Eugene Straussler, remained behind and was killed. Stoppard spent the rest of the war in different parts of India, ending up at school in Darjeeling. After the war, his mother married a British officer, Kenneth Stoppard, whose name the two boys took after the family arrived in England in 1946. Tom was educated at a prep school and a public school. On leaving school at seventeen he began working as a journalist on a local newspaper in Bristol, where his family lived.

Tom Stoppard lives with his second wife, Dr. Miriam Stoppard, well-known in her own right for her books and television programs, in a house built in 1722 set amid acres of fields and woodlands. The house has been attributed to John James, to Hawksmoor and to Vanburgh, but Stoppard prefers to think it was Vanburgh on the grounds that he was also a playwright. Stoppard has four sons, two of them by his first marriage, and he is close to them all: "My family and my work, that's it," he says.

At the time of this interview, Stoppard was near the end of rehearsals for his new play, Hapgood, *which has since opened in London and settled in to what seems a long and happy run. For the duration of the rehearsals Stoppard had rented a furnished apartment in central London in order to avoid commuting, and although he had said, "I would never volunteer to talk about my work and myself more than ninety seconds,"*

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he was extremely generous with his time and attention. Stoppard is tall and exotically handsome, and he speaks with a very slight lisp.

INTERVIEWER

How are the rehearsals going?

TOM STOPPARD

So far they are conforming to pattern, alas! I mean I am suffering from the usual delusion that the play was ready before we went into production. It happens every time. I give my publisher the finished text of the play so that it can be published not too long after the opening in London, but by the time the galleys arrive they're hopelessly out of date because of all the changes I've made during rehearsals. This time I gave them *Hapgood* and told them that it was folly to pretend it would be unaltered, but I added, "I think it won't be as bad as the others." It turned out to be worse. Yesterday I realized that a chunk of information in the third scene ought to be in the second scene, and it's like pulling out entrails: as in any surgery there's blood. As I was doing it I watched a documentary about Crick and Watson's discovery of the structure of DNA—the double helix. There was only one way all the information they had could fit but they couldn't figure out what it was. I felt the same. So the answer to your question is that the rehearsals are going well and enjoyably, but that I'm very busy with my pencil.

INTERVIEWER

What provokes the changes? Does the transfer from your imagination to the stage alter your perception? Or do the director and the actors make suggestions?

STOPPARD

They make a few suggestions which I am often happy to act upon. In the theater there is often a tension, almost a contradiction, between the way real people would think and behave, and a kind of imposed dramaticness. I like dialogue

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which is slightly more brittle than life. I have always admired and wished to write one of those 1940s film scripts where every line is written with a sharpness and economy which is frankly artificial. Peter Wood, the director with whom I've worked for sixteen years, sometimes feels obliged to find a humanity, perhaps a romantic ambiguity, in scenes which are not written like that but which, I hope, contain the possibility. I like surface gloss, but it's all too easy to get that right for the first night only to find that *that* was the best performance of the play; from then on the gloss starts cracking apart. The ideal is to make the groundwork so deep and solid that the actors are continually discovering new possibilities under the surface, so that the best performance turns out to be the last one. In my plays there are usually a few lines which Peter loathes, for their slickness or coldness, and we have a lot of fairly enjoyable squabbles which entail some messing about with the text as we rehearse. In the case of *Hapgood* there is a further problem which has to do with the narrative mechanics, because it's a plotty play, and I can't do plots and have no interest in plots.

INTERVIEWER

Yet you have produced some complex and plausible plots. So why the aversion?

STOPPARD

The subject matter of the play exists before the story and it is always something abstract. I get interested by a notion of some kind and see that it has dramatic possibilities. Gradually I see how a pure idea can be married with a dramatic event. But it is still not a play until you invent a plausible narrative. Sometimes this is not too hard—*The Real Thing* was fairly straightforward. For *Hapgood* the thing that I wanted to write about seemed to suit the form of an espionage thriller. It's not the sort of thing I read or write.

INTERVIEWER

What was the original idea that made you think of an espionage thriller?

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STOPPARD

It had to do with mathematics. I am not a mathematician but I was aware that for centuries mathematics was considered the queen of the sciences because it claimed certainty. It was grounded on some fundamental certainties—axioms—which led to others. But then, in a sense, it all started going wrong, with concepts like non-euclidean geometry—I mean, looking at it from Euclid's point of view. The mathematics of physics turned out to be grounded on *un*certainties, on probability and chance. And if you're me, you think—there's a play in that. Finding an idea for a play is like picking up a shell on a beach. I started reading about mathematics without finding what I was looking for. In the end I realized that what I was after was something which any first-year physics student is familiar with, namely quantum mechanics. So I started reading about that.

INTERVIEWER

It is said that you research your plays thoroughly.

STOPPARD

I don't think of it as research. I read for interest and enjoyment, and when I cease to enjoy it I stop. I didn't research quantum mechanics but I was fascinated by the mystery which lies in the foundation of the observable world, of which the most familiar example is the wave/particle duality of light. I thought it was a good metaphor for human personality. The language of espionage lends itself to this duality—think of the double agent.

INTERVIEWER

You seem to think the success of the play has so much to do with its production. Do you, therefore, get involved with the lighting, costumes, etc.? Please give examples, anecdotes.

STOPPARD

It is obvious that a given text (think of any classic) can give rise to a satisfying event or an unsatisfying one. These are the

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only relative values which end up mattering in the theater. A great production of a black comedy is better than a mediocre production of a comedy of errors. When the writing is over, the event is the thing. I attend the first rehearsal of a new play and every rehearsal after that, as well as discussions with designers, lighting designers, costume designers . . . I like to be there, even though I'm doing more listening than talking. When *Hapgood* was being designed, I kept insisting that the shower in the first scene wouldn't work unless it was in the middle of the upper stage, so that Hapgood could approach us facing down the middle. Peter and Carl insisted that the scene wouldn't work unless the main entrance doors were facing the audience. They were quite right, but so was I. We opened out of town with the shower in the wings, and it didn't work at all, so we ended up having to find a way to have both the doors and the shower in view of the audience. The look of the thing is one thing. The sound of it is more important. David Lean was quoted as saying somewhere that the hardest part of making films is knowing how fast or slow to make the actors speak. I suddenly saw how *horribly* difficult that made it to make a film. Because you can't change your mind. When you write a play, it makes a certain kind of noise in your head, and for me rehearsals are largely a process of trying to reproduce that noise. It is not always wise to reproduce it in every instance, but that's another question. The first time I met Laurence Olivier, we were casting *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*. He asked me about the Player. I said the Player should be a sneaky, snake-like sort of person. Olivier looked dubious. The part was given, thank God, or Olivier, to Graham Crowden who is about six-foot four and roars like a lion. Olivier came to rehearsal one day. He watched for about fifteen minutes, and then, leaving, made one suggestion. I forget what it was. At the door he turned again, twinkled at us all and said, "Just the odd pearl," and left.

INTERVIEWER

Is it a very anxious moment for you, working up to the first night?

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STOPPARD

Yes. You are trying to imagine the effect on people who know nothing about what is going on and whom you are taking through the story. In a normal spy thriller you contrive to delude the reader until all is revealed in the dénouement. This is the exact opposite of a scientific paper in which the dénouement—the discovery—is announced at the beginning. *Hapgood* to some extent follows this latter procedure. It is not a whodunnit because we are told who has done it near the beginning of the first act, so the story becomes *how* he did it.

INTERVIEWER

Did you draw on some famous spies, like Philby or Blunt, for your characters?

STOPPARD

Not at all. I wasn't really interested in authenticity. John Le Carré's *A Perfect Spy* uses the word "joe" for an agent who is being run by somebody, and I picked it up. I have no idea whether it is authentic or invented by Le Carré.

INTERVIEWER

What happens on the first night? Do you sit among the audience or in a concealed place at the back? And what do you do afterwards?

STOPPARD

The first *audience* is more interesting than the first night. We now have previews, which makes a difference. Actually, my play *The Real Inspector Hound* was the first to have previews in London, in 1968. Previews are essential. The idea of going straight from a dress-rehearsal to a first night is frightening. It happened with *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* and we got away with it, but for *Jumpers* we had several previews by the end of which I had taken fifteen minutes out of the play. I hate first nights. I attend out of courtesy for the actors and afterwards we all have a drink and go home.

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INTERVIEWER

How does the London theater world differ from New York?

STOPPARD

Theater in New York is nearer to the street. In London you have to go deep into the building, usually, to reach the place where theater happens. On Broadway, only the fire doors separate you from the sidewalk and you're lucky if the sound of a police car doesn't rip the envelope twice a night. This difference means something, I'm not quite sure what. Well, as Peter Brook will tell you, the theater has its roots in something holy, and perhaps we in London are still a little holier than thou. The potential rewards of theater in New York are really too great for its own good. One bullseye and you're rich and famous. The rich get more famous and the famous get richer. You're the talk of the town. The taxi drivers have read about you and they remember you for a fortnight. You get to be photographed for *Vogue* with new clothes and Vuitton luggage, if that's your bag. If it's a new play, everyone owes the writer, they celebrate him—the theater owners, the producers, the actors. Even the stage doorman is somehow touched by the wand. The sense of so much depending on success is very hard to ignore, perhaps impossible. It leads to disproportionate anxiety and disproportionate relief or disappointment. The British are more phlegmatic about these things. You know about British phlegm. The audiences, respectively, are included in this. In New York, expressions of appreciation have succumbed to galloping inflation—in London only the Americans stand up to applaud the actors, and only American audiences emit those high-pitched barks which signify the highest form of approval. But if you mean the difference between what happens on stage in London and New York, there isn't much, and there's no difference between the best. Cross-fertilization has evened out what I believe used to be quite a sharp difference between styles of American and British acting, although it is probably still a little harder to find American actors with an easy command of rhetoric, and British actors who can produce that controlled untidiness which, when we

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encountered it a generation ago, seemed to make acting life-like for the first time.

INTERVIEWER

I have heard that in New York people sit up and wait for the *New York Times* review, which makes or breaks a show. It is not like that in London, but do you worry all night until the reviews come out the next day?

STOPPARD

Certainly I'm anxious. One is implicated in other people's fortunes—producers, directors, actors—and one wants the play to succeed for their sake as much as for one's own. If there is a favorable consensus among the reviewers, you accept it as a reasonable judgment. If you get mixed reviews, you are heartened by those who enjoyed it and depressed by the rejections. What one is anxious about is the judgment on the event rather than the play. None of us would have worked so hard if we didn't believe in the play, and so we don't need a critic to tell us whether we liked it, but whether we succeeded in putting it across. For the text is only one aspect of an evening at the theater; often the most memorable moments have little to do with the words uttered. It is the totality—to use the jargon—which is being judged. A favorable judgment means that on that occasion the play has worked, which does not mean that it always will.

INTERVIEWER

Do critics matter as much?

STOPPARD

In the long term, not at all. In the short term they give an extra push, or conversely give you more to push against; but favorable reviews won't save a play for long if the audiences don't like it, and vice versa. The play has to *work*.

INTERVIEWER

I would like to know what you mean by "work."

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STOPPARD

It has to be truthful. The audience must believe. But the play is also a physical mechanism. Getting that mechanism to work takes an awful lot of time and preoccupation. The way music comes in and out, lights vary, etc. When you've got all that right you can get back to the text. Otherwise, the fact that it seems right on paper won't help you.

INTERVIEWER

Do you change things according to what the reviews say?

STOPPARD

No. But I change things according to what happens to the play, and what I think of it. Sometimes one is involved in a revival and one wants to change things because one has changed oneself, and what used to seem intriguing or amusing might now strike one as banal. Any revival in which I am involved is liable to change.

INTERVIEWER

It has been said that Kenneth Tynan was the last critic who had a definite point of view and was bold enough to express it, thereby influencing the direction of the theater. So perhaps critics do make a difference?

STOPPARD

Ken had enthusiasms. Some lasted longer than others and while he had them he pushed them. But you have to read critics critically and make the necessary adjustment according to what you know about them. When I was a critic—on my local paper in Bristol and later for a magazine in London—I floundered between pronouncing what I hoped were magisterial judgments and merely declaring my own taste. If I might quote myself from a previous interview—"I was not a good critic because I never had the moral character to pan a friend. I'll rephrase that—I had the moral character never to pan a friend."

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INTERVIEWER

But Tynan introduced into England what one associates with French intellectual life—a kind of intellectual terrorism, when suddenly one author or school is "in" and another "out," and woe betide he who disagrees! He destroyed people like Terrence Rattigan and Christopher Fry and all those he called "bourgeois" playwrights, and you had to love Osborne and Brecht or else! But I recently saw Rattigan's *Separate Tables* and thought it very good indeed, infinitely better than some of the plays Ken had praised and made fashionable.

STOPPARD

Which shows that he didn't destroy them. However, I know what you mean, and one or two of my close friends thoroughly disapproved of Ken. But I hope they know what I mean when I stick up for him. The first time I met Ken was when I was summoned to his tiny office when the National Theatre offices consisted of a wooden hut on waste ground, and I was so awed by being in a small room with him that I began to stutter. Ken stuttered, as you know. So we sat stuttering at each other, mainly about his shirt which was pale lemon and came from Turnbull and Asser in Jermyn Street. This was in the late summer of 1966 when we wore roll-neck shirts.

INTERVIEWER

You have been praised for your eloquence, your use of language—your aphorisms, puns, epigrams—as if you invented them, wrote them down and put them into your characters' mouths. Do you?

STOPPARD

No. They tend to show up when I need them. But perhaps it is significant that very often a particular line is more or less arbitrarily attached to a particular character. I can take a line from one character and give it to another. As I just told you, there was something in the third scene of *Hapgood* which I had to put in the second scene. But the dialogue was not be-

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tween the same two people—only one of them was the same. So the lines of a female character became those of a male, and it made no difference. In *Night and Day* I had to invent an African dictator, but there was no way I could do it unless he was the only African dictator who had been to the London School of Economics. You don't have to be African or a dictator to make those observations about the British press. I rely heavily on an actor's performance to help individualize a character.

INTERVIEWER

Do you act out all the characters as you write?

STOPPARD

Sometimes. I walk around the room speaking the dialogue.

INTERVIEWER

Once you've got the idea and devised the narrative, do you take notes while you're reading up on the subject?

STOPPARD

Not really. Sometimes, over the course of several months, I might cover a page with odds and ends, many of which might find their way into the play. But I don't write down in notebooks, nor jot down what I overhear—nothing like that.

INTERVIEWER

In the course of writing the play, do you get surprises, because for example, you don't know what a character is going to do next, or how the story will end?

STOPPARD

Absolutely.

INTERVIEWER

What about the order of the play, the number of acts and scenes?

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STOPPARD

I don't work out the whole plot before I begin, just the general outline. The play alters as you write it. For example, in *Jumpers* the end of the first act in my scheme turned out to be the end of the second act, followed by only an epilogue. *Hapgood* was in three acts and is now in two. The reason for the change is partly intrinsic and partly circumstantial. Managements prefer two-act plays because they think that audiences like only one interval, and Peter thought it would be better for the play. It shows how pragmatic the theater is, perhaps the most pragmatic art form, apart from advertising. For example, the male secretary, Maggs, used to be Madge, a woman. But when we came to choose the understudies we realized that if the secretary were male he could understudy so-and-so. It turned out to be better for the play also, because then Hapgood is the only woman surrounded by all these men. But at first it was a question of casting.

INTERVIEWER

Having got your outline, do you proceed from the beginning to the end chronologically?

STOPPARD

Yes I do. I write plays from beginning to end, without making stabs at intermediate scenes, so the first thing I write is the first line of the play. By that time I have formed some idea of the set but I don't write that down. I don't write down anything which I can keep in my head—stage directions and so on. When I have got to the end of the play—which I write with a fountain pen; you can't scribble with a typewriter—there is almost nothing on the page except what people say. Then I dictate the play, ad-libbing all the stage directions into a tape machine from which my secretary transcribes the first script.

INTERVIEWER

What are the pitfalls on the way? Things that might get you stuck?

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STOPPARD

It is not like playing the violin—not difficult in that way. The difficulties vary at different stages. The first is that you haven't got anything you wish to write a play about. Then you get an idea, but it might be several ideas that could belong to two or three plays. Finally, if you are lucky, they may fit into the same play. The next difficulty, as I said before, is to translate these abstract ideas into concrete situations. That is a very long and elaborate period. Another difficulty is knowing when to start; it's chicken-and-egg—you don't know what you're going to write until you start, and you can't start until you know. Finally, in some strange, quantum mechanical way, the two trains arrive on the same line without colliding, and you can begin. The following stage is not exactly pleasant but exciting and absorbing—you live with the fear that "it" may go away. There is a three-month period when I don't want to say good morning to anyone lest I miss the thought that would make all the difference.

INTERVIEWER

Once the play begins to take shape, what do you feel?

STOPPARD

Tremendous joy. Because whenever I finish a play I have no feeling that I would ever have another one to write.

INTERVIEWER

Do you disappear from home to write?

STOPPARD

I disappear into myself. Sometimes I go away for a short period, say a week, to think and concentrate, then I come back home to carry on.

INTERVIEWER

Where do you work and when?

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STOPPARD

I have a very nice long room, which used to be the stable. It has a desk and lots of paper, etc. But most of my plays are written on the kitchen table at night, when everybody has gone to bed and I feel completely at peace. During the day, somehow I don't get much done; although I have a secretary who answers the phone, I always want to know who it is, and I generally get distracted.

INTERVIEWER

Do you have an ideal spectator in mind when you write?

STOPPARD

Perhaps I do. Peter Wood has quite a different spectator in mind, one who is a cross between Rupert Bear and Winnie the Pooh. He assumes bafflement in order to force me to explain on a level of banality. If I had an ideal spectator it would be someone more sharp-witted and attentive than the average theatergoer whom Peter thinks of. A lot of changes in rehearsals have to do with reconciling his spectator with mine.

INTERVIEWER

You have said that all the characters talk like you. Does that mean that you have trouble creating female characters? You once said, "There is an area of mystery about women which I find difficult to penetrate." Yet the eponymous character of your new play, *Hapgood*, is a woman.

STOPPARD

I wonder when I said that! It is not what I feel now. When I said I wasn't interested by plot or character I meant that they are not the point for me. Before writing *Night and Day* I thought, I'm sick of people saying there are no good parts for women in my plays, so I'll do one. It turned out not to be just about a woman, and I thought, well, one day I'll do a Joan of Arc. But I never think, "I'm writing for a woman so it had better be different."

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INTERVIEWER

How important are curtain lines?

STOPPARD

Very important, because they define the play's shape, like the spans of a bridge. It's like architecture—there is a structure and a conscious architect at work. Otherwise you could decide to have an interval at 8:30, and whatever was being said at that moment would be your curtain line. It wouldn't do.

INTERVIEWER

You said that you have worked with Peter Wood for sixteen years, but are you always closely involved with your plays' productions?

STOPPARD

In this country, yes. In America I was involved with the production of *The Real Thing*, which was directed by Mike Nichols. But who knows what's going on elsewhere? You are pleased the plays are being done and hope for the best.

INTERVIEWER

You have been accused of superficiality; some people say that your plays are all linguistic pyrotechnics, dazzling wordplay, intelligent punning, but that they don't have much substance. How do you react to that charge?

STOPPARD

I suppose there is a certain justice in it, insofar as if I were to write an essay instead of a play about any of these subjects it wouldn't be a profound essay.

INTERVIEWER

Nowadays fame has become a thing in itself. In French the word is "gloire," which is nicer because it denotes achievement; it has connotations of glory. But fame doesn't: you can be famous just for being famous. Now that you are, do you still feel excited by it, or do you think it isn't that important?

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STOPPARD

Oh, I like it. The advantages are psychological, social and material. The first because I don't have to worry about who I am—I am the man who has written these plays. The social advantages appeal to half of me because there are two of me: the recluse and the fan. And the fan in me is still thrilled to meet people I admire. As for the material side, I like having some money. The best way to gauge wealth is to consider the amount of money which you can spend *thoughtlessly*—a casual purchase which simply doesn't register. The really rich can do it in Cartier's; I'm quite happy if I can do it in a good bookshop or a good restaurant.

INTERVIEWER

What about the company of your peers. Harold Pinter?

STOPPARD

The first time I met Harold Pinter was when I was a journalist in Bristol and he came down to see a student production of *The Birthday Party*. I realized he was sitting in the seat in front of me. I was tremendously intimidated and spent a good long time working out how to engage him in conversation. Finally, I tapped him on the shoulder and said, "Are you Harold Pinter or do you just look like him?" He said, "What?" So that was the end of that.

INTERVIEWER

Going back to your work, *Jumpers* was about moral philosophy, and in it you attacked logical positivism and its denial that metaphysical questions are valid . . .

STOPPARD

Ah, but remember that I was attacking a dodo—logical positivism was over by the time I wrote the play. I was amused to see Freddy [Sir Alfred] Ayer being interviewed on television. The interviewer asked him what were the defects of logical positivism, and Freddy answered, "I suppose its main defect was that it wasn't true." The play addressed itself to a set

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of attitudes which people didn't think of as philosophical but which in fact were. At the same time, it tried to be a moral play, because while George has the right ideas, he is also a culpable person; while he is defending his ideas and attacking the opposition, he is also neglecting everyone around him and shutting out his wife who is in need, not to mention shooting his hare and stepping on his tortoise.

INTERVIEWER

In the play you say that the Ten Commandments, unlike tennis rules, can't be changed, implying that there are fundamental moral principles which are eternally valid because of their transcendental provenance—their foundation in religion. Do you believe that?

STOPPARD

Yes, I do.

INTERVIEWER

Are you religious?

STOPPARD

Well, I keep looking over my shoulder. When I am asked whether I believe in God, my answer is that I don't know what the question means. I approve of belief in God and I try to behave as if there is one, but that hardly amounts to faith. I don't know what religious certainty would consist of, though many apparently have it. I am uneasy with religious ceremonials, because I think intellectually, and the case for God is not an intellectual one. However, militant humanism grates on me much more than evangelism.

INTERVIEWER

I would like to ask you about your early influences. What about the angry young men and the kitchen-sink school of the fifties, or Beckett, whom you are quoted as saying had the greatest impact on you?

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STOPPARD

There were good plays and not-so-good plays. I was moved by and interested by John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, *The Birthday Party* by Pinter, *Next Time I'll Sing To You* . . . I mean when I was starting to write plays. I'd be wary of calling them influences. I don't write the way I write because I liked them, I liked them because of the way I write, or despite it.

INTERVIEWER

So if we forget about "influence," who are the writers you admire and go back to?

STOPPARD

I had a passion for Hemingway and Evelyn Waugh, and I think I will always return to them, apart from anyone else.

INTERVIEWER

Does it annoy you that people compare you to George Bernard Shaw?

STOPPARD

I don't think they do very much. I find the comparison embarrassing, by which I mean flattering. Shaw raises conversation to the power of drama, and he does it for three acts. I sometimes do it for three pages, though the tone is very different; but my theatrical impulses are flashier. The result can be exhilarating when things go right, and pathetic when things go wrong. Anyway, one's admirations don't have much to do with the way one likes to write. I've been going around for years saying that Alan Bennett is one of the best playwrights we've had this century, and he does exactly what I don't do and can't do; he makes drama out of character study. The fact that his jokes are very good helps but he's really a social anthropologist who prefers to report in the form of plays. Incidentally, I think Bennett's comparative lack of recognition among the academically-minded has most to do with a snobbishness

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about television—where much of his best work appears. David Mamet is another great enthusiasm of mine, and another writer who has almost nothing in common with me.

INTERVIEWER

What actually led you to write plays? Could you describe the genesis of your plays other than *Hapgood* and *Jumpers*?

STOPPARD

I started writing plays because everybody else was doing it at the time. As for the genesis of plays, it is never the story. The story comes just about last. I'm not sure I can generalize. The genesis of *Travesties* was simply the information that James Joyce, Tristan Tzara and Lenin were all in Zurich at the same time. Anybody can see that there was some kind of play in that. But what play? I started to read Richard Ellman's biography of Joyce, and came across Henry Carr, and so on and so on. In the case of *Night and Day*, it was merely that I had been a reporter, that I knew quite a lot about journalism, and that I should have been writing another play about *something* and that therefore it was probably a good idea to write a play about journalists. After that, it was just a case of shuffling around my bits of knowledge and my prejudices until they began to suggest some kind of story. I was also shuffling a separate pack of cards which had to do with sexual attractions. Quite soon I started trying to integrate the two packs. And so on.

INTERVIEWER

There's another aspect of your work which I would like to talk about, that is adaptations of other playwrights' plays. Are the two activities very different?

STOPPARD

Yes, they are. I don't do adaptations because I have a thing about them, but to keep busy. I write a play every three or four years and they don't take that long—perhaps a year each.

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INTERVIEWER

Does someone do the literal translation for you from the original language first?

STOPPARD

Yes, since I don't read any other languages. I have done two plays by Arthur Schnitzler, *Dalliance* and *Undiscovered Country*, one by Molnar, *Rough Crossing*, and a play by Johann Nestroy which became *On The Razzle*.

INTERVIEWER

Do you tinker with the original text?

STOPPARD

There is no general rule. *Undiscovered Country* was pretty faithful. I thought of Schnitzler as a modern classic, not to be monkeyed about with. But you're not doing an author a favor if the adaptation is not vibrant. So in the end I started "helping," not because Schnitzler was defective but because he was writing in 1905 in Vienna. When you are writing a play you use cultural references by the thousands, and they all interconnect like a nervous system. In the case of *Dalliance*, Peter Wood started with the idea that the third act should be transferred to the wings of the opera. He did it beautifully and it worked very well. The number of critics who suddenly turned out to be Schnitzler purists was quite surprising. As for *On The Razzle*, that had a wonderful plot—which wasn't Nestroy's own anyway—and I invented most of the dialogue. The Molnar play was set in an Italian castle and I put it on an ocean liner called "The Italian Castle." And I also made up nearly all the dialogue. So you can see there's a difference between "translation" and "adaptation."

INTERVIEWER

So far your adaptations have been of plays. Have you ever thought of adapting a novel, or a book of testimony, into a play or a series of plays? For example, Primo Levi's *If This Is*

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a Man, or Nadezhda Mandelstam's *Hope Against Hope*? I mention these because I know you admire them as much as I do.

STOPPARD

I think Nadezhda Mandelstam's books are two of the greatest books written in this century. But what would be the point of turning them into plays?

INTERVIEWER

To make them accessible to a larger audience, the way Olivia Manning's *The Balkan Trilogy* was resurrected and became a bestseller after it was shown on television as a six-part series.

STOPPARD

It would be admirable if it made people turn to the Mandelstam books. I quite agree that television would be the way to do it.

INTERVIEWER

Let's talk about another of your activities—writing filmscripts. You have never written an original one. Why not?

STOPPARD

Because I don't have any original ideas to spare.

INTERVIEWER

What if someone gave you the idea?

STOPPARD

That is possible, but it would be pure accident if you gave me the right one. The reason is that all you know about me is what I have written so far; it has nothing to do with what I want to do next because I don't know, either.

INTERVIEWER

What is the difference between writing a play and writing a filmscript?

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STOPPARD

The main difference is that in films the writer serves the director, and in the theater the director serves the writer—broadly speaking.

INTERVIEWER

Now for the first time you are going to direct your own film version of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*. Are you looking forward to it?

STOPPARD

The reason why I agreed to do it myself was that the producers gave me a list of twenty possible directors and I couldn't see why any of them should or should not do it, since I had no idea what each would wish to do. So I suggested myself, because it was the line of least resistance, and also because I am the only director willing to commit the necessary violence to the play—I've thrown masses of it out, and I've added things.

INTERVIEWER

You are friendly with Czech playwrights, like Václav Havel and others. Do you feel any special affinity with them as a result of your own Czech origin?

STOPPARD

This whole Czech thing about me has gotten wildly out of hand. I wasn't two years old when I left the country and I was back one week in 1977. I went to an English school and was brought up in English. So I don't feel Czech. I like what Havel writes. When I first came across his work, I thought *The Memorandum* was a play I'd have liked to have written, and you don't think that of many plays. And when I met him I loved him as a person. I met other writers there I liked and admired, and I felt their situation keenly. But I could have gotten onto the wrong plane and landed in Poland or Paraguay and felt the same about writers' situations there.

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INTERVIEWER

I wanted to ask you about radio plays, because you started out writing some, and before *Rosencrantz* had a number of them produced on the radio. It is always astonishing that despite television, radio is still so popular, especially for plays. What are your feelings about radio—its technique, possibilities, and differences from other dramatic forms?

STOPPARD

Radio plays are neither easier nor harder. I'm supposed to be writing one now, and the hard part is simply finding a play to write. The pleasant part will be writing it. There is nothing much to be said about radio technique except what is obvious—scene setting through dialogue and sound effects. I'd like to write a radio play which consisted entirely of sound effects but I suppose it would be rather a short one.

INTERVIEWER

After you have seen *Hapgood* through, what are you going to do?

STOPPARD

I would like to write a very simple play, perhaps with two or three people in one setting. A literature play rather than an event play. Getting *Hapgood* ready was exhausting and frustrating—it has as many scene changes, light cues, sound cues, etc., as a musical. I'd like to write a play where all the time and the energy can be devoted to language, thought process and emotion.

INTERVIEWER

It is often said that a writer's output is the product of a psychosis, of self-examination. Is there any indication of this in your case?

STOPPARD

You tell me!

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INTERVIEWER

What is the most difficult aspect of playwriting?

STOPPARD

Structure.

INTERVIEWER

And the easiest?

STOPPARD

Dialogue.

INTERVIEWER

What about the curtain lines? Do they come first and then you work your way towards them, or do they arrive in the natural progression of writing the dialogue?

STOPPARD

Curtain lines tend to be produced under the pressure of the preceding two or three acts, and usually they seem so dead right, to me anyway, that it really is as if they were in the DNA, unique and inevitable.

INTERVIEWER

What are some of your favorite curtain lines—and not necessarily those in your own plays?

STOPPARD

"The son of a bitch stole my watch" [from *The Front Page*]—I quote from memory—and "You that way; we this way" [from *Love's Labour's Lost*].

INTERVIEWER

Not to put you to the test, but can you provide a curtain line for this interview?

STOPPARD

"That's all, folks."

—Shusha Guppy

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B. A. St. Andrews

On Witnessing Open-Heart Surgery

Perched on this metal tripod
silent as an uninspired sibyl

I watch a living body (male,
white, 56) draped in skyblue

cotton become a table laid
with tubes and clamps, forceps

and pots. His sternum, with one
whirr of sterile steel, opens

wondrous and deep, multicolored
and stratified as rock: a grand

canyon. Buzz and slurp, beep
and hum: the life-sustaining chorus

of machinery sings to one man's
bleeding heart. Cauterized, clamped,

iced and suctioned, the body sends
signals through a TV monitor: day-time

drama at its liveliest. The chief
surgeon enters, wearing a helmet

of light; hands dripping, Pilate
promises to be responsible this time.

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Nine ministering angels attend
as Terpsichore choreographs this dance

of death and life. "Stop ventilating,
please . . . He's shunting . . . What's your

flow? . . . Easy, Jesus, please." Cotton
blue perfusionists float over to teach

me of valves that open and close, they
say, "like butterflies' wings." One

explains the plastic pledgets that
stop the vital stitches from pulling

through the aortic cloth "like thread
through a cheap pair of pants." I

lean over a face turned to stone against
such suffering. The valve slides down

down the silk road where steel slivers
of the crescent-moon seal it into the valley

of mystery. As the one drum begins its
thrum, the sibyl shudders into song.

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Three Poems by Jane Hirshfield

The Mesmer

These mail-ordered tulips,
shockingly gaudy,
open and close, re-open, re-close,
like a storefront, time after time,
until the noon comes that they open too far and are
suddenly vanished,
a shiver of crayon-yellows and reds, of violet
reaching towards black that wind-drifts away across the lawn:
the just fate of the over-ambitious.
And yet, haven't we each attempted that trick, desiring
ourselves into wideness, more wideness, until we are lost?
But, being human, return to the gaudy shock of being
once again fleshed,
the solid bodies—as planets are called—
that consciousness wears. Though so close to the rest
that we envy what seems so restful, the water that stills
when held, streams on when let free, and eventually
sinks so far that it comes into air.
Becoming, we say, of a blouse, new-cut hair, of
quantum physics'
particles' waves, or the flutter of scarf into dove—
Its colors mesmerize the long nights, keeping us riveted,
world-bound,
whispering, how is it done?

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The Stone Of Heaven

Here, where the rivers dredge up
the very stone of Heaven, we name its colors—
muttonfat jade, kingfisher jade, jade of appleskin green.

And here, in the glittering
hues of the Flemish Masters, we sample their wine;
rest in their windows' sun-warmth,
cross with pleasure their scrubbed tile floors.
Everywhere the details leap like fish—bright shards
of water out of water, facet-cut, swift-moving
on the myriad bones.

Any woodthrush shows it—he sings,
not to fill the world, but because he is filled.

But the world does not fill with us,
it spills and spills, whirrs with owl-wings,
rises, sets, stuns us with planet-rings, stars.
A carnival tent, a fluttering of banners.

O baker of yeast-scented loaves,
sword dancer,
seamstress, weaver of shattering glass,
O whirler of winds, boat-swallower,
germinant seed,
O seasons that sing in our ears in the shape of O—
we name your colors muttonfat, kingfisher, jade,
we name your colors anthracite, orca, growth-tip of pine,
we name them arpeggio, pond,
we name them flickering helix within the cell, burning
coal tunnel, blossom of salt,
we name them roof flashing copper, frost-scent at morning,

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smoke-singe of pearl,
from black-flowering to light-flowering we name them,
from barest conception, the almost not thought of, to
heaviest matter, we name them,
from glacier-lit blue to the gold of iguana we name them,
and naming, begin to see,
and seeing, begin to assemble the plain stones of earth.

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Autumn

Again the wind
flakes gold-leaf from the trees
and the painting darkens—
as if a thousand penitents
kissed an icon
till it thinned
back to bare wood,
without diminishment.

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Arthur Gold

1944

Those were the polio years. The war
Prospered. In Warm Springs Georgia
Strong-armed Sister Kenny
Fixed the limbs of a sleeping child.
In Penn Station New York City,
Slapping nightsticks on their palms,
The Shore Patrol patrolled.
Crowds were evil, water too.
I was not to swim in public pools
Or amuse myself in parks. A girl
Stretched out her limbs upon a bench
In Penn Station. It was morning.
The hands of the big clock moved slow.
Her father in a fedora was coming by
To pick her up at ten. My courtesy
Cousin and namesake Arthur
Caught polio at camp and died.
My father said naked we come in,
Naked we go out. Were children
Buried naked, was Arthur buried so?
The train, its hunger satisfied,
Rolled west out of Penn Station,
Overcoming the resistance of the air.
He had a brother Ted, a mother
Doris. It was a good year for ocarinas.
Ukeleles too did their part
To overcome a girl's resistance
To a soldier on a crowded train.
Years after the war she called.
I confused my cousin Ted with Arthur.
"How's Arthur?" I asked, then blushed.
She forgave me but my cheek
Still burns as from a needed slap.

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Thomas Bolt

1971 Pontiac LeMans

Auto in sunlight: every trace of gloss
Is dulled a rusting green.
Even the fenders are a dirty chrome
Which blunts light like a pine log;
Still, it runs.

This is the car someone abandons
At a grassy roadside,
Like an old punt, rotten-hulled,
Sunk in river muck above the seats.
Near this realization,

It will do 90 still.
Or, filled with gasoline, will drive all night
Toward any destination;
It can kill.
This is the real world.

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Twister

Hiram Moody

A long gap in the conversation followed and then he told his father about the tornado at school that day. They were out on the patio in back, facing the street that ran past. The father smoothed a long strand of hair over the barren part of his head and returned to the plate of macaroni and cheese in his lap.

One of those Garden State twisters, his father said, mouth full.

He nodded.

A car passed on the street kicking up fallen leaves in its treads, and he told his father how they were all sitting out behind the observatory, as they did on those irresistible days, discussing the will of man and the will of nature which was the subject of the course, when the gravel in the parking lot, and with it, stray newspaper and styrofoam cups swept upwards in a stiff opaque gust.

Nodding, his father loaded another forkful.

The gravel and dust rose up in front of the class. There were the hedges off to one side, running alongside the recital hall, and on the other side the observatory, and in the middle of these the unpaved parking lot, and amid it, amid the cars, the

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cloud borne upwards turning and turning back onto itself, a barber pole swirling upwards.

It roared in their ears, a calamity from another time, glacial movement or tidal waves, and their casual interest, as though the twister were simply an audio-visual aid, turned to alarm. The instructor fell silent. The funnel swept across the street toward the athletic fields. Good thing no one was practicing yet.

His father lurched too late to catch the elbow noodle slipping from the plate and soon it was lodged between his thigh and the metal folding chair. He stood. He craned to see where the macaroni had gummed up his flannel trousers. Go on, he said.

Now the twister had made its way to the bleachers at the border of the gridiron, and effortlessly it upended the kelly green woodwork there. Into the air the stands wobbled and swam, and flopped to the ground after, like a marionette unstrung, and then it doglegged to the right to pick up another set of bleachers, this one lifted higher than the first, a full ten feet or so, to be wrecked as forcefully as a sea vessel flung against a rocky shore. A single beam lingered in the air for an impossible time, straight up thirty feet in the blue it dared gravity, stuck for a moment before tumbling like waterfowl shot out of the sky.

He stopped there. He fingered the hole in the knee of his worn denim pants. Ran his fingers along paint stains there.

The father set his plate down on the flagstone. A breeze stirred the backyard. Activity besieged each of three birdfeeders. The father tasted his drink and set it between his legs.

Then what? he said to his son.

That was it. He told his father that was all. An empty calm. The class awaited the next signs of destruction, trees snapping, roofs flying off like the tops of jack-in-the-boxes, but nothing happened. The twister ran out of steam. Vanished.

The son smiled with accomplishment.

The father drank.

There was another silence.

The first lie that troubled him, the lie about the twister was the one about its having happened that day, when the actual

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date was maybe two or three weeks before. He had a dog-eared copy of the school paper to prove it. Photos of the kindling, and the fellow on the dozer waving his hardhat as he prepared to nudge the splintered grandstands over beside the observatory, where they had sat since.

The second lie was that he was there. He wasn't, although he was very close with a bunch of kids who were, well, not exactly close but he had almost taken the course. He had interviewed two of the kids who had taken it and who had been there, before the editor of the school paper ran his own account, along with the photo of the dozer. Well, he didn't interview them really. He didn't feel comfortable asking, he never did. Although he overheard one guy and this guy said he had felt closer to the others for a couple of days, like they were a real tight group, but now when he sat next to them in class it was just like sitting next to anyone at all.

Do you want anything? the father said and without waiting he overturned the last amber inch in his glass, spilling it out onto the edge of the lawn, and headed back to the house. A pair of yellowjackets circled around the plate he left behind.

The son didn't say anything. Started to and then stopped.

And there were other lies too, these were not the first, some of them too minor to mention but some not, some which dogged him, like how he had told his father he could swim when he had almost drowned during a swimming test once; how he had claimed to lose his virginity to the daughter of a certain woman his father had dated, when this daughter wouldn't even speak to him; how he pretended to remember the faces of people in their family long ago lost; how he misunderstood a poem in a book he had, so that his father would sit with him and offer an explanation when the poem was as clear as change jangling.

A squirrel dove from a branch to the gutter pipe. Birds roosted on telephone lines. A car passed on the street and the rustle of leaves beneath it rose and fell like ocean surf.

He wondered if he told these lies about the twister, the very existence of which was in doubt because of his record where

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lying was concerned, simply out of fear. He thought it was that but also more.

The porch door screeched. Why don't you come inside? the father said. It'll get chilly soon anyway.

The father stood where he was, holding the door open. The sun dipped in the direction of all great tornadoes, where towns had been splayed and scarred by the truth of tornadoes, and in the opposing skies, the moon, from where it was stuck on the end of a maple branch, rose.

And the next day the father would pass the twister off on a buddy at lunch. And years later the son would unearth it for a woman he trusted.

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Harry Mathews

Condo Auction

I

The salesmen, disguised as befuddled policemen, waveringly surrounded the art collector.
They had driven capably all the way from The Hague to East Harlem.
The owners shrewdly viewed their plight with this distorting but comforting disposition:
Turned upside down, whatever its form, the picture acquired greater reality.
Although fully responsible, they waived membership in the drought administration: "Not our kind of time."

We have world enough, and time, and comfy, reliable appetites.
If you're looking for lucidity, forget it—our script is polysynthetic, womb-like, versed.
We vector into frumpy solitudes and start doodling there.
From time to time we buy dinner for handlebar impresarios, then have to tell them to get lost.
You cannot view our plan as a concept, but it's more forgivable as a plan than as a glossary.

II

I swung desperately on the announcement tree, favoring one hot hand then the other.
You came into my view as a dead-mute twentieth-century

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painter, with a few gross cachou "Bombay spheres"
in your hair.
I said I had been a visionary nocturnal lad, avid for
opportunities of longing and learning.
I begged you, you forgave me. Your period was as late as
a rusty weathercock.
I became a glass man wistfully purveying culture cans.

III

Va-t-il nous déchirer . . . ? Under his wildly wrenched wing
foaming above the pebbles
He permitted me to keep score. Because it was so déjà vu,
foreign, and funny,
He looked like Akhenaton. Because this raised the question,
were those guys all previewed for one showing?,
He gave me the space to establish my female dreams. Smug
as he was,
He was an Indian giver and made me return (by messenger)
his yucca-green skin-diving flippers.

He became a cultural virtuoso. Adrift, not knowing where
to apply,
He unwound the lost beat of Albigensian song. By means of
inapplicable vocal calisthenics,
He decided what happened in the Danish play. Out of
revocable fourteenth-century glosses,
He vamped the original Pythagorean dialogue. Imbued with
the aura of Greece,
He summoned me back, holding my arm under his as evening
fell on Persepolis.
He unfumblingly drew the parallel: a material one.
Comparing every tradition with another,
He was absorbed by a finer if no less gripping melancholy.
A voluble kind of pilgrim,

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He pampered my godless wastes. With what he feebly called
in-voicing,
He attained a stasis between mortality and immortality.
Unfeelingly, peacefully,
He authored vanity comic books about his hero—a pastoral,
glacial hero in an age of automobiles.

Where are they, the inevitable ones, the bearers of
hermaphroditic grace?
They had passed out of the slums and suburbs uncowed by
purpose and residual feelings. Neither fleeing
Nor seeking, contented by the bread of coincidence, they
are to be found on the move not there but everyplace.
They are not seen specifically to have moved. They live,
but we love them,
Who appear to us wearing formidable shoes and our own
vintage clothes.

IV

Voyez, voyez, j'ai les mains pleines des fleurs!
She forced my imagination, because she had become a law to
be discovered
Punctually. She had all the gravid charm of a brand-new
Trojan horse.
She vouchsafed my wobbliness as though one was an
appealingly masculine exile.
Next came the offer to purvey a model of her black-and-
yellow wing machinery.

V

They were forever told that the old bastard was compulsively
giving it away.
They refused to recognize something obvious (obvious like
the living bejeezis in his pew):
The reviewed poet's transparent tongue comfortingly stapled

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To his lapel. They soared in marvelous twilight definitions,
their bodies rinsed and dried. They
Had a longing for actual things, such as party favors, or
a blast of motors, a whiff of scallions, swallows of
salt and virgin oil.

VI

I gave you a painting by Di Pisis, and you matter-of-factly
strung it up on your bedroom wall. To me,
The "Glass Man" was the portrayal of an honorary banner that
half reveals a sarcophagus under a recumbent marble male.
You saw in it a princely curtain half concealing a prone
man turned white with the beginnings of violent pleasure.
I could not perceive if I was to focus my gaze on the foreground
cloth or on what lay beyond it.
I keep veering through gropy wishes and dreams: you refuse
me entrance to your tomb.

My valid hand stretched out to you. You blew your nose in
a handkerchief printed with statements from the *I Ching*.
You put your fingers to your mouth before proving you were
a true blonde.
Even if my foremost concern was to get answers, the sharpness
of your gaze instructed,
"Patience." Then you turned into the hedged lane of beeches,
its unfallen leaves an intense crepuscular yellow.
After your example, I took off my clothes, sure that you
saw me, that you would give me back what you saw.

VII

He refused to be anything but a guide. Knowledgeable, alert,
unprevaricating,
He suggested that the search for verbal results to some puzzles
would lead to setbacks. Dogmatically,
He left me with whatever strength I had. Seeing in me
qualities that busily escaped me,

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He wore dyed-leather suits, left his red hair mussed, and
gave his benediction to the most casual passing traveler.

VIII

We see that the luscious green girl who works at the dime
store is privately gathering rubies.
We can tell that she blurs some other object—a fiddler's
fiddle, which plainly remains as visible as she.
Our craft is drowned in morning glue, the bevy of our souls
drips oil.
We have been yanked away to a puny commerce of clocks and
graves.
We become devoted to abstraction—abstraction that
transforms people into red, yellow, and green.

IX

We are called the favorably settled poets, a category best
restricted to men.
We are now turned into an object of antagonism, a specific
antagonism channeled through the chilly space
Of the present. It's no problem for us if drummers and
guitarists decline from one verity
To the next: they will only convulse themselves in a green
frenzy, beyond our pale.
At their probable return, we can vouch that we engender
antagonisms of our own.

X

Ton souvenir en moi luit comme un ostensoir!
She walked in front of the enshrined host, publicly scattering
pyracantha berries and dog violets.
The cortege proceeded, with its dull gold highlights, its
smoke, its boy voices (such harsh thirds!),

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With her. The event was distantly heart-rending in its
squandered faith, which became her past first years.
She left the charming realm of a visibility just seen, of
a wound just felt.

Le ciel n'est pas plus pur que le fond de mon coeur!
What was hard was telling if, in all that numbed activity,
the reference was
Herself. Her bloodless face, mauve eyes, and white-blond
hair flashed through the interstices
Of cottonwoods. She had no desire to travel, to begin again,
nor did she expect the Yukon to come to her.
She kept bees and walked—unnetted, tidy—among a vocal
mist of bees.

My inclination was to seek out new possibilities of craving,
of comprehension,
And I found my body tight in your livid arms, and a black
bay (down) and a black sky (up).
I believed you and would trust you because you primly recalled
cavernous blue light.
As you moved away, later, last of all, you said, "Don't bother
to catch up on your sleep."
At sunup a boat dropped me in a grove of yews, on a stiff
but ascendable coast.

XI

The dispossessed string crew, they who forged themselves
women's veils, bodily pursue
Untitled desire where ruins are perversely camouflaged among
the disintegrations of history,
Where singers, worrisomely batlike, dart from ground floor
to roof level.
They live but are not seen to move. We respect them. We
forget them.

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Unshod, the musicians vanish, asking, "Sweet love, how like you this?"

XII

The real thing—could she formulate or contrive it, in her brown study?
She claimed to have a Buddhist future but watched the clouds with anthropomorphic ingenuity.
With me she acted nonchalantly poetic, helping me to get past my unappeasable flus and avidities.
In the thick of raw incredulity it occurred to her to give up thinking about "animal" and "mineral."
She acknowledged her privilege of being overcome by fierce, serious zeals.

We undressed her beautifully, privately, taking our time and hers.
From her breasts we cast off two veils, strips of sumptuously opposing primary colors.
Unbound from the starry silk folds of a waistband, a civil dimpling was shown.
We turned her on her belly to shed the paisley pantaloons so dramatically girding her loins.
We concluded that she was in no way the object of our impervious intentions.

To us it looks as though humans march through rows of vapid but juicy casabas.
We intuited divisions glazed over one another casually and transparently, down to an embedded periwinkle.
At dawn we dipped a toe at the lakeside cove, each body mindful of its mother's dead father.
We followed a procession of masks—smiles portraying a sense beyond vulgar glee or sadness.
Vengefully we followed them back to a lake and cursed the dappled, red-fleshed trout.

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XIII

"Oui, puisque je retrouve un ami si fidèle."
More than once she vowed to escape my boggled memory of her. To run after her produced contrary results.
At times, on olive-shadowed, sea-sucked rocks, I plied dreamily towards her forgotten absence.
She promised to possibly screw me if I gave up any hope of nailing her down.
At midnight, in Very shadows of public moonshine, I made the mistake of understanding her.

XIV

He made his wished-for vaseline link-up: an invisible century. In a gray fogey's dance
He fagged me in John's carnival hole. When, in boyish Christian times,
He murdered me, emitting the beep of a wayfaring mathematics,
He discovered death connecting life and faith. Indirectly, hypothetically, even bumblingly,
He trained himself for a gentler if no less busily clownlike vesper melancholy.

So you make the avoidable plunge, stepping gingerly into the chill. I knew
Myself to be an untalkative architect from elsewhere, my pate speckled with mica.
You considered yourself an avowedly morning person, getting business done, unperplexed by past closures
Or by voided goals—hardly my case, who watched you purely out of greed, who wanted
What you were about to have. You lapsed into your waitress role, facing my table with empty stone goblets.

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XV

Within their chamber music they have professionally
concealed a machine gun.
It is aimed at the weaving tail of the great piebald music
fish. Lesser schools
Publicly follow lines of a glittering fugue they have chosen
not to mind not choosing.
Perfervid color-seeping bullets whisk by them in lettuce-green
light.
The musicians still provide any willing taker with their
professional pleasures.

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Clayton Eshleman

The Night Against Its Lit Elastic

He stayed up late, staved off sleep, wandered, drank,
as if sleep were a kind of devouring,
as if it would masticate and spit him out at dawn
a juiceless thing that would have to resurrect
and learn, all over again, to walk—
ridiculous,
for the ore of night was dream, and to push
the night against its lit elastic made him so tired
he did not dream, or recall, or
allow himself to recall dreams of fatigue,
bent earthworm doctors struggling from tumulus to tumulus
administering to eyes in dark whose bone paws
clutched the pills and disappeared,
or *was* it ridiculous to want
to push the dark, depoeticize it, as if it were a loaded
flatbed, or moveable mountain, to push it into dawn,
so that light would swarm with the hearts of the tumulus
inhabitants,
skeletal raccoons, bearded white-haired badgers,
gnarled hermaphrodites whose orifices and pipes wheezed
that steam he wanted to inject into weightless day—

yet what to really see or really feel in Durango?
Sides of 19th century buildings
like mock-ups of the aftermath of Pompeii?
Indian beads laid out on velvet, kewpie dolls,
Minnie Mouse sweatshirts, "fresh" mesquite-broiled salmon,
the sound-asleep proprietors, *Here Dempsey kayoed*
Cochran to win $20 in 1912—or that is how he recalled
the recent wall mural, shuffling toward Denny's where giant
forms
were putting away steaks at 2 AM. North Americans!

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They looked like mercs, or rioters, swollen
restitched Abe Lincolns, under the bright lights of an Ensor
Halloween. He sat down by a farmer his own age
who he felt would break his back if true feelings were shared,
he knew this in his midwestern bones
which were still processing the Christmas-tree tinsel,
the presents that had so pleased him at eight.
The farmer introduced him to a pal one stool away,
tried to speak, teeth tongue and lips
one sutured muscle, a lisping groan,
whose life swarmed in friendship-hungry eyes
as he gulped and nodded, the farmer's tag-along
catastrophe-buddy—Vietnam? *Or just another damaged man?*
As the eggs went into his gut, the tinsel bucked and soured.
The present, glutted with its own unloved trash,
undermined even childhood snow. He stayed up late to feel this?
Wandered out of Denny's, rammed Durango up his right armpit
and limped toward the Jarvis Hotel. Wounded—
the empty basin of the street, wounded—
the imprint of place, no place, sturdy plastic patina
under which the larvae of an alien immensity were coiling,
muscular larvae, wetbacks dead from thirst, blending with
the New Mexico desert where ancient creosote
(the in-flight magazine stated) was the oldest thing alive on earth,
"10,000 year old seed near Yuma discovered in pack rat midden."
Did he stay up just to feel the roller-coaster-like
heave of each thing short-circuit and fizz?
Did he refuse sleep to suffer this peculiar painless rancor?
How could anyone complain about a comfortable bed?
Yet it seemed a cold grill, with a brutalized Adam,
a blood-stained blood boy cursing beneath,
a mined-out bully who hacked up around

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the mattress to claw at the sleeper,
a corpse under water, as the currents groped and belittled
him . . .
As he unraveled into dream, the raccoons and badgers
emerged from their tumuli, in overalls, with trowels,
they wended their way (as childhood animals do)
to the cemetery where the earthworm doctor's funeral was
a static
purple sketch of gestures . . . a canopy, a sobbing cricket . . .
then the gnarled hermaphrodite appeared
and began to leak from every pore . . . they lowered
the doctor in his casket-bag into a Mayan well?
a fleet of submarines drew up . . .
the sleeper was at last
drinking his dream, coming apart, coalescing,
an oatmeal made sodden not in a bowl
but floating, like an isle, in a ring of light.
Not yet digested by America, he had also failed to force
the stuck drawer of night into the bureau of the day.
That ring of light. The one reward of sleep,
while falling to press the heels of palms hard against
closed lids, watched the filigreed nerve gold
shimmer and mill into formations,
coalescing into a fat doughnut of light,
blackness at center, blackness surrounding.
A kind of madonna curled in the aura of reptilian continuity
he floated, in pieta to
the unknowable body the poet takes upon his lap
everytime he starts to write.

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The Man Who Would Not Go Away

Susan Minot

He was one of those reporters. Never in a place long. Always going away, always coming back. Then he seemed to be around more. Then he was calling me up. I knew he did not have the most promising history with women. I knew that. I kept cool, he kept calling.

Afterwards when things fell apart and he drifted away, well, like fog really, I thought back to those early days when he'd been so persistent. Some men are at their best in pursuit. They put on clean shirts, have a certain gleam in their eye.

Then that gleam fades. He grows distracted, glances off, not wanting to miss the next thing coming along.

Uncertainty is like a drug. It quickens the blood, wears on the nerves. Slowly it dawned on me this was one of those loose and easy things. Maybe I'll learn something, I thought. I did. I learned things. I learned I didn't have the stomach for it. You need an iron stomach, and nerves of steel.

I was relieved when the man went off, finally, to South Africa. He planned a long stay.

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Still, traces of him remained. At first, it was his name. I avoided the people he knew.

But at a dinner party strangers were discussing how the man had been spotted in some exotic locale with a mysterious woman at the end of a very long hall. Where does he find them? one person asked. He keeps them secret, another replied.

Or I end up at a restaurant sitting in the exact same chair I sat in one time with the man. Up his face rises like something out of "The Wizard of Oz," underlit, ghoulish, laughing in a weird way, really not like the man at all.

I began to take in more movies than usual. Working for a film magazine I see plenty of movies already. Movies are soothing, they take you out of yourself. But movies can also take you over. Credits begin to drift over me while I'm brushing my teeth or buying a token. A soundtrack swells and I'm in another world. It's not always the best movie. This did not happen when the man was around. When I was with him, I was simply there.

At the club everyone wears black. Metal lawn chairs sit unevenly on the concrete. Women's high heels bob from crossed legs, drinks spill lazily. A long marine tank set into one wall casts off a green glow. The music is deep and relentless and rather stirring. The fish in the tank, oblivious, sealed off, glide slowly in one direction, flip around, glide slowly in the other. Someone taps me on the shoulder.

I move aside and the green light falls on the stranger's face. His eyebrows are raised expectantly. I don't recognize him. Then I do and feel myself blush. I've met him only once. He's a friend of the man's. It acts like an electric conductor, zapping me.

This is not what I expected. This is not what I thought he'd leave behind.

The man's articles appear. In them he's gone on to be another person, one I don't know anymore, off in other worlds. Those worlds begin to matter more.

Everywhere I go people have bad backs, something the man had. In the middle of an interview a director excuses himself to lie down on the editing room floor, just as the man would

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do, slipping into a back room at a party to lie next to a bed piled with coats. He lay very still, nothing moving but his eyeballs. The only thing to do for a bad back, he'd say, was bear it. It's the sort of thing my father would say.

I swim at the Health Club. A huge tiled room echoing with splashes. Tiny waves teem on the surface, lights make eel reflections. One bullish head plows forward, thunderous kick, frothy wake. At the end of a lane, he tucks into a ball, flips and shoots forward like a torpedo. I don't even dare go in.

I visit my brother who's an investment banker. They've got a house, a baby. My sister-in-law consoles me. "All men are rats," she says and smoothes my brother's forehead adoringly. "Even the angels." The lawn at the back of their house is absolutely unremarkable but in the evenings the space is so tranquil it's mesmerizing with the dark shadows at the edge. The baby crawls on it; to her it's a vast plain. That night when I get into bed I'm exhausted. The leaves are rustling at the window, the man's voice is in them.

Midday, midtown. A man dashing through the bright crowd bears a remarkable resemblance. This was happening a lot. Men across subway platforms. Dark figures sidling in late to movies. A lone soul at the end of a block, rocking on his heels, waiting for a cab. But this fellow, his hair slicked back, was carrying a shopping bag from a lingerie shop, one I knew. Through the curling holes in the bag's design, I could see black lacey things. The man had certains tastes, certain things he liked. His face would become serious and harsh when I tried those things on.

I find pockets of calm. At the museum, past the flower sprays, up the sweeping staircase, I spend time in the emptier rooms. Flemish paintings, fifteenth-century gold frames. There he is, in one, gripping a sword handle, glancing down in a disdainful way.

Suddenly I have a hundred questions for him, things I didn't ask before except now that he keeps appearing I realize how little I knew. Who was he anyway? Who is he now?

The woman on the hotel staircase was crying. I'd seen her before in the lobby, smoking, in a strapless dress. "I'm *trying*

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to understand," she said in a trembling voice to the black-tied fellow at her side. He held her elbow with a tentative hand as they moved slowly up the stairs. "You say one thing and do another," the woman sobbed, too upset to care if anyone could hear. "There's just so much I can take." The man mumbled. I couldn't hear what but a man explaining himself to a woman has a certain particular tone. The woman cried, "But it's different for a woman!" All hope seemed gone from her voice.

The library is peaceful. I stack books under the lampshade, researching articles. Heads at other tables are bent over gently, pages rustle. Shoes clop by on the wooden floor. The heating vent hums in the drowsy air. Then I hear his voice behind me. It says my name.

Going to the movies, people say, is like returning to the womb. But that's not quite right. Your eyes are one pair in a galaxy of eyes, all gazing with a kind of rapture at bright things flickering across a screen. You watch the same movement, have the same current running through your hearts. You're not alone at all.

Things appear at the corner of my eye. A fleeting figure ducking into an alley. Someone fifteen stories up slipping behind a terrace pillar. Across my street curtains close the second I glance over.

I wake in the middle of the night and the man's head is poking through a jagged hole in the wall. His expression is oddly inquisitive, in a scientific way. It is not a look he ever actually gave me.

I once had a conviction having to do with love. I floated on the certainty of it. It was a man's name. But devotion on its own can't last. It is a silly, foolish thing. I thought I knew how to guard against an attachment.

The man and I were driving in the country. He was at the wheel, telling me a story of one of his adventures. He'd been stuck in some war-torn hill town in Central America, barely knowing the language, a deserted place far from everything, not sure if he'd get out alive. He turned his face toward me, talking lazily, making jokes about it. It was evening and growing dark with a moon flickering behind him out the window.

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He leaned in, looking back and forth between me and the road. We were sealed off, traveling through a darkening world. At one point his eyes met mine and in that instant I realized something had come over me and that I was and had been for a while I guess in a new and different state and that it had to do with him. I did not think of it with terror at the time but serenely because the first feeling of love is always serene, and happy. It rejoices. Life has a purpose after all. I kept it to myself, knowing it was not what the man was after, knowing it was in fact what he was running quickly from. But for a while it made me very glad. Then it stopped. And after, it did not go away.

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Portfolio

Six Drawings

Robert Gober

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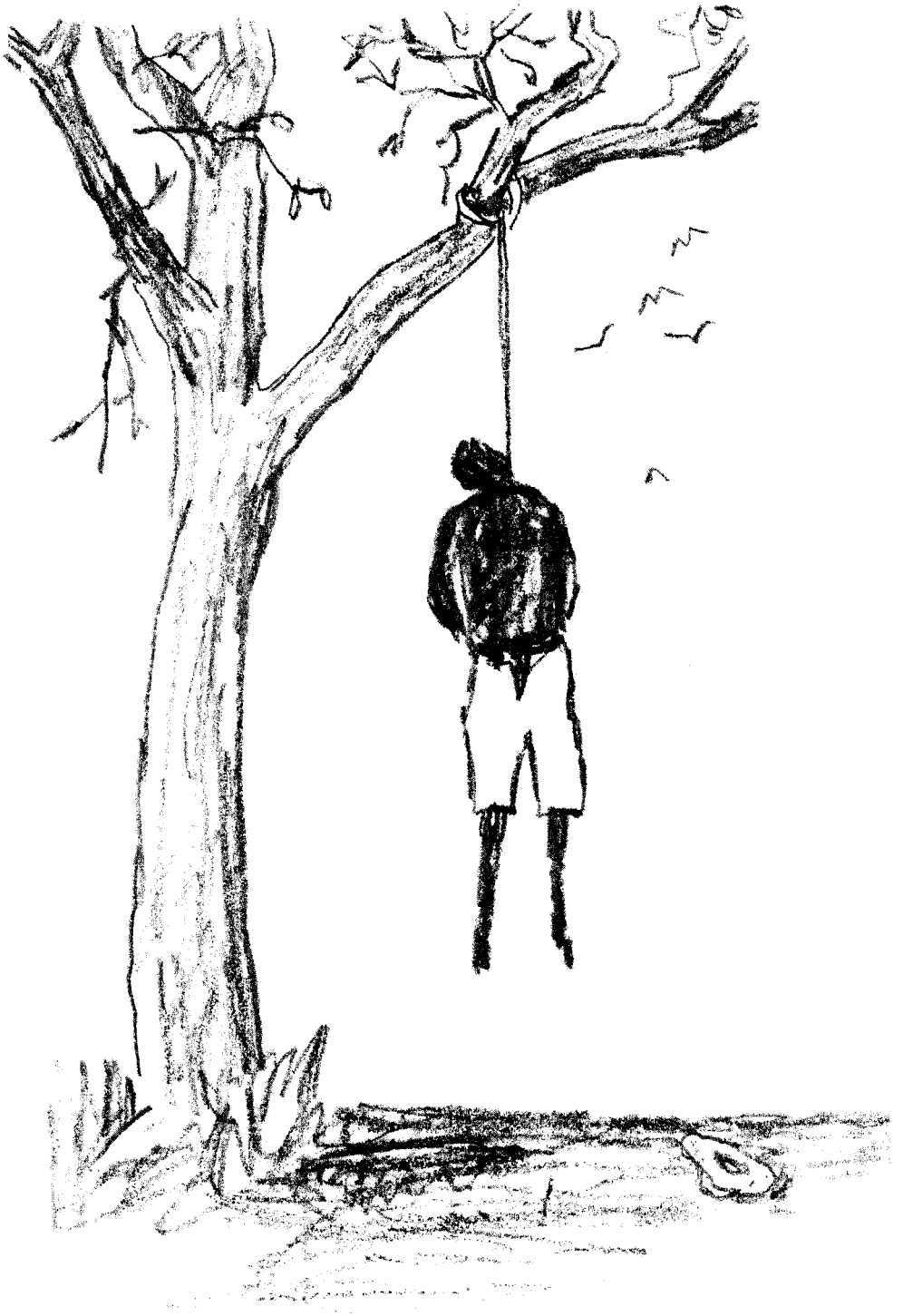

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Three Poems by Joyce Carol Oates

Make-Up Artist

"I feel like such a . . . shit.
I rescued this little lost terrier
on Broadway and 90th, mangy little thing
that couldn't even bark, I took him home,
took him to the vet, nursed him back
to health or almost, then, Labor Day week-
end,—my husband and I are separated, that's
the thing—I went to Atlantic City with a
friend and when I got back Skippy was dead.
I guess I'd sort of forgotten him, locked
in the kitchen, so much on my mind I forgot
to give him extra water and food and he never
did bark just sort of accepted things. . . .
Look straight up at the ceiling now, I promise
I won't jab you in the eye."

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Photography Session

for Jim Jacobs

You died on Wednesday. On Friday
I'm hauled by limousine to be photographed
for a magazine feature, Charles Street
near Varick, a garbagey smell to the air.
March 25 and warm as May! "My object,"
the photographer explains, "is an utterly
natural image." His five assistants, all male,
move like dancers in the semi-dark.

For years you'd kept your dying a secret.
The illness . . . its dread name. Chemotherapy
and blood transfusions and the rest. Sparing
us, one might say cheating us, of premature sorrow.

Thirty minutes were required to make up my face.
Pain doesn't sweat at any pore, nor
does the meager soul reveal itself.
Layered in paste, paint, rouge . . . I'm safe.
"Look into the lens," the photographer says
patiently, repeatedly, "—look at *me*."

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Prenatal

Here is the wide veranda striped in sunshine
and here, beside the house, those bushes heavy
with tiny white clustered berries said
to be poison though burst against the tongue

they have no taste, or nearly. Here,
the oak bannister and the dizzy ascendancy
of stairs. The toilet bowl ringed with rust.
The sobbing behind a locked door. And here,

though you won't want to look, the tide
of black ants in the cupboard, the beetles
roiling in the earthen cellar. Black winter rain
dripping from the shingled roof,

the giddy heat of May for which no one is
prepared, and the constellations in their slow
plunge across the sky . . . . How many millennia
have not known us!

The baby carriage, leathery black like a bat's wings,
waits on the veranda, and here, in the doorway,
hat pushed forward on his blunt young head, hand
raised smartly in greeting, your father.

How many millennia.

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Two Poems by C. D. Wright

Our Dust

I am your ancestor. You know next-to-nothing
about me.
There is no reason for you to imagine
the rooms I occupied or my heavy hair.
Not the faint vinegar smell of me. Or
the rubbered damp
of Forrest and I coupling on the landing
en route to our detached day.

You didn't know my weariness, error, incapacity.
I was the poet
of shadow work and towns with quarter-inch
phone books, of failed
roadside zoos. The poet of yard eggs and
sharpening shops,
jobs at the weapons plant and the Maybelline
factory on the penitentiary road.

A poet of spiderwort and jacks-in-the-pulpit,
hollyhocks against the tool shed.
An unsmiling dark blond.
The one with the trowel in her handbag.
I dug up protected and private things.
That sort, I was.
My graves went undecorated and my churches
abandoned. This wasn't planned, but practice.

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I was the poet of short-tailed cats and yellow
line paint.
Of satellite dishes and Peterbilt trucks. Red Man
Chewing Tobacco, Black Cat Fireworks, Triple Hit
Creme Soda. Also of dirt dobbers, nightcrawlers,
martin houses, honey, and whetstones
from the Novaculite Uplift. What remained
of The Uplift.

I had registered dogs 4 sale; rocks, dung,
and straw.
I was a poet of hummingbird hives along with
redheaded stepbrothers.

The poet of good walking shoes—a necessity
in vernacular parts—and push mowers.
The rumor that I was once seen sleeping
in a refrigerator box is false (he was a brother
who hated me).
Nor was I the one lunching at the Governor's
mansion.

I didn't work off a grid. Or prime the surface
if I could get off without it. I made
simple music
out of sticks and string. On side B of me,
experimental guitar, night repairs and suppers
such as this.
You could count on me to make a bad situation
worse like putting liquid make-up over
a passion mark.

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I never raised your rent. Or anyone else's by God.
Never said I loved you. The future gave me chills.
I used the medium to say: Arise arise and
come together.
Free your children. Come on everybody. Let's start
with Baltimore.

Believe me I am not being modest when I
admit my life doesn't bear repeating. I
agreed to be the poet of one life,
one death alone. I have seen myself
in the black car. I have seen the retreat
of the black car.

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More Blues and the Abstract Truth

In the mornings we're in the dark;
even at the end of June
the zucchini keep on the sill.
Call Grandmother for advice
and she says O you know
I used to grow so many things.

Hair appears on my chest in dreams;
I back the car over a soft, large object.
The paperboy comes to collect
with a pitbull. Ring Grandmother
and she says Well you know
death is death and none other.

Then there's the frequent bleeding,
the tender nipples and the rot
under the floormat. If I'm not seeing
a cold-eyed doctor it is
another gouging mechanic.
Grandmother says Thanks to the blue rugs
and Eileen Briscoe's elms
the house keeps cool.

Well. Then. You say. Grandmother
let me just ask you this:
How does a body rise again and rinse
her mouth from the tap. And how
does a body put in a plum tree
or lie again on top of another body
or string a trellis. Or go on drying
the flatware. Fix rainbow trout. Grout the tile.
Buy a bag of onions. Beat an egg stiff. Yes,

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how does the cat continue
to lick itself from toenail to tailhole.
And how does a body break
bread with the word when the word
has broken. Again. And. Again.
With the wine. And the loaf.
And the excellent glass
of the body. And she says,

Even. If. The Sky. Is. Falling.
My. Peace. Rose. Is. In. Bloom.

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Chapter Two

"I know you're going to Italy." The elderly voice, half a challenge and half a plea, came down the telephone to Rowena as she was in the act of giving Jacqueline her supper. She popped a tear soldier into her mouth to give herself strength to encounter her father.

"I called you earlier. Sam answered. She seemed to be alone in the house . . . ."

"She wasn't alone. I had to go back for work but Mrs O'Rourke was here as always."

"And Gamps." She said. "You never guess. He rented this unbelievable pink villa in Italy." "How pleasant it is to have money, high ho." Of course I could never have your patience and study the stock exchange prices hour by hour, Mistress Cribb. It far rather do something exciting, like sit here and watch my fingernails grow."

Not for the first time she wondered how on earth her father had persuaded the children to call him Gamps', and decided, not for the first time, that he had done it with the sole purpose of driving his mad daughter to the edge. Whilst the same could in view, no doubt, he called her Mistress Cribb," a name he never taught to her when she was a child, and insisted on changing the name of the last his grandchildren came to hear. Henrietta became Harriet, Samantha was naturally 'Sam' and little Jacqueline 'Jack the Lad'. So far as he was concerned Rowena did not exist. Knew what to call him. She had never managed to find his own bantering invitation, made to her during the permissive sixties, to call him 'Hereford', his Christian name. Now that he was in his mid seventies he signed his rare letters to her "Daddy" (when they spoke now she did her best to avoid calling him anything.

"That was my fourth soldier and I'm not sick" said Jack the Lad.

"I have been brushing up my Italian" her father

A manuscript page from John Mortimer's most recent novel, Summer's Lease.

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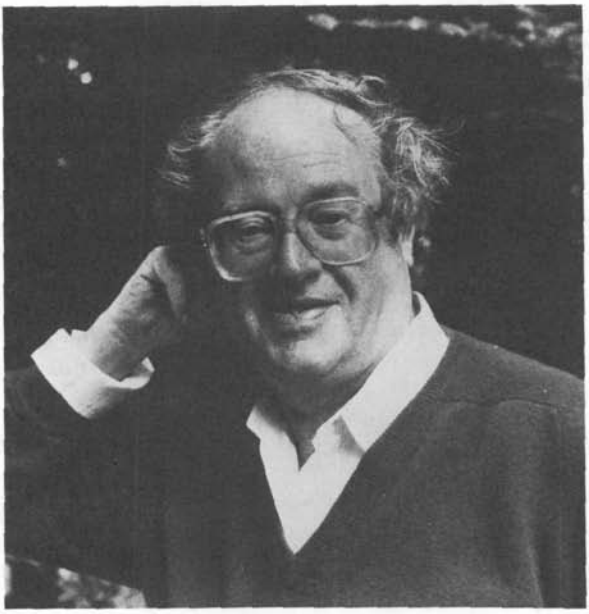

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The Art of Fiction CVI
John Mortimer

The only child of a highly literate and eccentric barrister and his wife, John Mortimer was born into a life of literature and the law. After Mortimer's birth in April, 1923, he was raised in his parents' flat in the Inner Temple in London and later the Chiltern Hills, in a home and garden designed by his father. Mortimer led a rather solitary childhood, enlivened by long walks in the company of his blind father who recited Sherlock Holmes stories to him from memory.

Mortimer was educated at The Dragon School in Oxford, then at Harrow where he escaped the sports program to attend

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the theater, and at Brasenose College, Oxford. During the war he served in the Crown Film Unit making documentary films as an assistant director and then scriptwriter. He studied law and was called to the bar in 1948, subsequently working as a divorce barrister and later as a Queen's Counsel in criminal law. He went on to act as defense lawyer in several celebrated cases concerning questions of censorship and freedom of expression.

Mortimer retired from the law ten years ago, but not before he had established himself as a playwright for stage, screen and radio, and as a novelist, journalist, translator and author of nonfiction volumes—even while pursuing a full-time law practice. He has written over sixty-five scripts for film and television, some forty scripts for radio, nine novels, several volumes of Rumpole stories, five volumes of nonfiction, and countless articles for newspapers and magazines. One of his latest accomplishments is a translation of the Strauss opera Die Fledermaus.

Mortimer was married to the writer Penelope Mortimer for twenty-three years, during which time the couple had two children and were parents to her four children from a previous marriage. The two wrote one travel book and a screenplay together.

In 1972 Mortimer married Penny Gollop, with whom he now has two daughters, Emily, age seventeen, and Rosamund, four years old. The family resides in London and in the expanded house in the Chilterns, in Oxfordshire, where they maintain the lovely gardens established by Mortimer's parents. The Mortimers also spend considerable time in Italy, where Mortimer has set his latest novel, Summer's Lease *(1988).*

The following interview was conducted in Mortimer's homes in London and Oxfordshire, and in his favorite local pub, The Bull & Butcher, a stone's throw away from the idyllic churchyard where his parents are buried. We also conversed during a tour of his garden. There he spoke about his father while pointing out various flora that his parents had cultivated as well as the very tree where the accident occurred that destroyed the elder Mortimer's vision. Driving us through the

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Chiltern Hills in his red Mercedes with opera gently emanating from the stereo, he recalled his boyhood and showed us some of the locations filmed for productions of Voyage Round My Father *and* Paradise Postponed. *Places from his boyhood, familiar to viewers of the television series—the local churches, a windmill, the homes of the local gentry, even the grave of a pet monkey—were all pointed out in due course along with revealing comments disclosing that* this *rural outbuilding actually houses a jacuzzi, and* that *one is owned by a rock star. It seems the chairmakers and field workers of Mortimer's childhood were driven from their beautiful real estate years ago. But the bulk of our conversation occurred in Mortimer's study in the Oxfordshire house, where he relaxed on a sofa with his dog Tizzy beside him, and where he frequently bestirred himself to stoke a blazing wood fire.*

INTERVIEWER

Because of the popularity of your character Rumpole of the Bailey, and because you practiced law for the greater part of your working life, one thinks of you as a barrister *and* writer. In your autobiographical novel, *Clinging to the Wreckage,* you wrote, "As a barrister who wrote, or, as I wanted to think of it, as a writer who did barristering, I was stretched between two opposite extremes." Did your dual professions sometimes make you feel as if you were leading a double life?

JOHN MORTIMER

Yes, but then that's what I like. I liked it! I mean I love leading double lives because I have a very low threshold of boredom. My happiest thing was to go to court and do a murder case and then come out and go to a rehearsal and see a lot of actors acting something I'd written. And I'd always had a feeling that the real life was in the acting and the pretend life was in the murder trial!

INTERVIEWER

Which was the more real to you as a person, the role of the writer or of the barrister?

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MORTIMER

Life as a barrister never was terribly real to me and courtrooms were always a place of fantasy to me. They had nothing to do with discovering the truth, really, of course.

INTERVIEWER

Your father was a barrister, so presumably the idea of a barristerial career came to you early in life. Did you also, at a young age, dream of becoming a writer?

MORTIMER

I knew early on that I was going to be a writer. I think it's something rather like a curse that you're born with. I knew I wanted to be a writer and my father was far too intelligent to tell me not to be one. Instead of that, he said, "Of course you'll be a writer. Of course you'll be a very successful writer but just till you make a fortune by writing, just divorce a few people. You know, just a few. There's nothing in it." He thought that writers' wives led such terrible lives because the writer was always at home brewing tea and stumped for words. And he said, "Your marriage will be much happier if you go down to Temple tube station and go to the law courts and divorce people." And he told me there was really nothing to being a lawyer except a certain amount of common sense, and relatively clean fingernails. You see, I was practically born into the divorce courts. My father was the *doyen* of the divorce barristers. He was an extremely erudite and very famous divorce barrister. So that when I was a little boy in the nursery, instead of a story like "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs," I used to get "The Duchess and the Seven Co-Respondents." My father used to return to me glowing with his triumphs in the divorce courts and give me wonderful lines which I was afterwards able to use in a play I wrote about him. He did really come home to me one night in the nursery and say, "I had a wonderful day in court, John. Terrific trial," he said. "Managed to prove adultery by evidence of inclination and opportunity," he said. "The only piece of evidence we had was a pair of footprints upside down on the dashboard of an Austin 711 parked in a Hampstead gar-

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den suburb." That was my father. You've read *Voyage Round My Father,* my play about him, so you know that my father went blind and my mother had the task of reading aloud to my father all of this terrible evidence in all of his divorce cases. And they used to travel up to London from Henley-on-Thames, where we lived, and they used to sit in the first-class compartment on the Great Western Railway. If you may picture the scene: my mother was reading out all this terrible evidence about stained sheets and male and female clothing scattered around hotel bedrooms—and the train would grind to a halt, somewhere around Slough, and the entire first class carriage would fall absolutely silent, listening to the ever-diminishing tale, in the hope of catching the name of some close friend or relative who has at last been caught out!

INTERVIEWER

According to both your play and your novel about your father, his blindness was never mentioned by anyone in his family?

MORTIMER

Yes. That is so.

INTERVIEWER

Your work about your father is handled with humor and affection, yet it would seem that the circumstances of having such a father would not always have been easy. It appears that there was sometimes a lack of communication and, as in the case of his blindness, an unwillingness even to mention an issue of major importance. How did you come to your fond comprehension of your parents?

MORTIMER

Well, they were very nice to me, my parents; they were never nasty. And they did treat me as if I were grown up. I try and treat my children from the age of ten months as if they were totally grown up, which I think is the only way to treat children. But as for that lack of communication you mention, I'm

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very fond of that, I think. I hate people saying what they think. If you're an American you must say what you think whereas if you're English you should say everything *except* what you think.

INTERVIEWER

This leaves much more room for speculation, obviously.

MORTIMER

And also it's a much more interesting way to write, because you have to tell the audience what people think by means of what they're *not* saying, instead of what they are saying. So with my parents, I was perfectly able to cope with all of that, really, and the fact that they didn't say things indicated a trust, in a way.

INTERVIEWER

And your father's appreciation of literature was also a great influence upon you as a developing writer.

MORTIMER

That is so. As he couldn't see, I used to read to him. I read everything to him. I read a lot of poetry and Shakespeare—he knew all of the plays of Shakespeare by heart. We used to go to the theater every year at Stratford-on-Avon. We always used to arrive about a quarter of an hour after the curtain rose, because my father enjoyed a seven-course dinner. But he was a wonderful help in the audience because he always sat in the front row of the stalls, he knew all of the plays by heart, and he could always recite all of the lines about fifteen seconds before the actors. And like Rumpole—this was something I used in Rumpole later—my father would always quote Shakespeare extremely inappositely. When I was about four, every time he saw me, my father would say, "Is execution done on Cawdor?" which, when you're four, is a pretty tough question to answer.

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INTERVIEWER

You say you knew from an early age that you wanted to be a writer. Aside from your father's love of literature and his influence upon you, do you recall any hints coming from within yourself that you might one day write? For instance, did you find yourself narrating your own day-to-day activities to yourself as they occurred?

MORTIMER

Oh, absolutely! And also talking to myself in the third person. I remember doing that and I still do it.

INTERVIEWER

I understand your father was also a great admirer of Sherlock Holmes.

MORTIMER

Well, I think everybody enjoys Sherlock Holmes. I suppose there *are* people who don't enjoy detective stories. But Sherlock Holmes is a great part of my childhood. My father was absolutely besotted with him. We used to take long walks together during which my father would recite the whole of a Holmes story.

INTERVIEWER

Your father had an extraordinary memory. Do you think your own memory is similarly excellent?

MORTIMER

I don't know. It developed gradually. I think it's a great pity that nowadays nobody ever learns poetry in school, because the poetry you learn in school you never forget in your entire life. And of course I learned a lot of Shakespeare because I used to perform the plays for my father. Then, if you're a courtroom lawyer, it's like playing bridge; you do have to remember the evidence, you have to remember what people have said day-to-day. You have to be able to think on your feet.

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INTERVIEWER

This well-trained memory must serve you well as a writer.

MORTIMER

Absolutely. But of course there are areas where my memory is not so good. I have a very bad memory for people's names, for instance.

INTERVIEWER

I noticed that you have made allusions to Sherlock Holmes in the Rumpole stories. Are these ideas that sprang to mind from your memory of the Holmes canon?

MORTIMER

Rumpole is terribly founded on the Sherlock Holmes stories. The structure of the Rumpole stories is very Sherlockian. And there are lots of quotations from Sherlock Holmes in Rumpole. When Rumpole pretends to die in order to get an adjournment of a case in "The Last Resort," it's taken from Doyle's "The Dying Detective."

INTERVIEWER

What is, for you, the particular appeal of the Holmes stories?

MORTIMER

They're a whole way of looking at life, aren't they? I've always enjoyed crime fiction. I think that much of the best writing being done today is in crime novels. The plot and discipline essential to a crime novel save it from the terrible traps of being sensitive and stream-of-consciousness and all of that stuff. You do need that discipline, I think, and plot! Life happens in plots all the time; life is absolutely composed of plots!

INTERVIEWER

That's the truth of life, I think.

MORTIMER

Yes. And coincidences. All of these things happen in life.

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And suspense. I think that the writer Ruth Rendell said the most important thing is suspense. Whatever it is, whatever story you are telling, unless it's got suspense it won't keep people wondering what's going to happen next.

INTERVIEWER

Did you learn this lesson early in your career? Tell us about your early days in writing, leading to the publication of your first novel.

MORTIMER

Well, the war started. And you can't divorce people in war; it doesn't look good. So I entered a thing called the Crown Film Unit which was making documentary films about the war; and I went into quite a new world, the world of film technicians, of cameramen, of prop men and actors and actresses, and it was all a wonderful world to me. But I was a fourth assistant director in this film unit. The scriptwriter was a wonderful writer named Laurie Lee to whom I owe a great deal. As a fourth assistant director I found that the only job I was asked to do was to make tea for the director and to say, "Quiet please," at the beginning of every shot. And so I used to say, "Quiet please," in a very nervous and timid voice—being very nervous and timid as I am to this day. And when I said, "Quiet please," everybody on the set went on sawing wood, hammering nails, making love, playing pontoon, and they took absolutely no notice of me at all. So one day I lost my patience with them all and I yelled, "QUIET PLEASE, you bastards!" and they all threatened to strike. So then they decided I'd do a lot less harm being a writer.

INTERVIEWER

Was Laurie Lee a significant influence upon you? Was he a mentor?

MORTIMER

Well, this was part of the documentary movement which had started before the war. There was a man called John Grierson, who was a Scot, and he was a major force in the documen-

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tary idea. One of our precepts was that you didn't use actors; you used the actual people. You *did* write stories and you *did* write scenes but they were played by real farmers or aircraft pilots.

INTERVIEWER

But since you weren't a farmer or pilot yourself, how did you know what to write?

MORTIMER

You had them say "Roger!" a lot. But no, you did research. I went down in a mine, for instance. It's a funny trick that you learn, writing documentaries, or being a barrister, for that matter. You *can* prepare yourself to cross-examine a doctor on the vagal nerve. You don't *really* know all about it but you know how to put it so that a jury can understand it.

INTERVIEWER

Or, in film, an audience; or in prose, the reader.

MORTIMER

That's right.

INTERVIEWER

You wrote about your experience in the Crown Film Unit in *Charade,* your first novel, originally published in 1947. The novel was published in its first American edition by Viking in 1986. How was *Charade* received when it was first published?

MORTIMER

It was quite a success. The first notice I got—and I don't like notices; they make me very frightened—was by a man called Daniel George who wrote in *The Daily Express*, "Not for fifteen years have I found so certain a touch." Now if I got that nowadays I would be absolutely delighted. But when I got that when I was twenty-three I was absolutely furious. I thought, "Who is this swine whom he read fifteen years ago who had such wonderful writing?"

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INTERVIEWER

But in any case you were encouraged enough by the critical response to write more novels, even after you returned to the legal profession?

MORTIMER

Yes.

INTERVIEWER

Would you have continued to write novels, even if the reviews had not been so favorable?

MORTIMER

Well, novels were the only thing to write in those days, really. That was 1947. There wasn't any television, for a start. The theater was given over to revivals. Of course, T.S. Eliot was writing plays but those were verse plays. It wasn't really until *Look Back In Anger*, in the mid-fifties, that new serious writers came into the British theater. So nobody thought of writing plays, and a novel was the only thing to write. And you know, *Charade* was turned down by a few publishers before it was accepted, and I'd written one unpublished novel before that. So I don't think bad reviews would have stopped me, however much they might have depressed me.

INTERVIEWER

How did your service in the Crown Film Unit come to an end?

MORTIMER

Well, it all *did* come to an end. All the husbands came back from the forces and life took on a grimmer hue. And I didn't really know what I would do. I could have gone on writing films for the Rank Organization. But all of the films of the Rank Organization featured Margaret Lockwood dressed in Regency costumes and flourishing a riding whip. I thought that was rather a distasteful thing to have to write, so I went back to divorcing people.

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INTERVIEWER

Would you comment on how your work as a barrister influenced your literary career, even before you created Rumpole?

MORTIMER

There are a lot of similarities between writing and the law, particularly in the way in which I did the law, which was by being an advocate. If you're a defense person, you don't usually open cases. But if you do open cases, which you do in civil cases if you're the plaintiff, you have to tell the story to the jury or to the judge, *very*, very simply, and you must tell them in a narrative which is going to make them listen. That's very good narrative training, I think. You may have to assemble the facts of some very, very complicated cases and narrate them in a way that will *arrest* them. So that's good training for a writer. And there's the fact that you've got to get up and make a final speech; there's no way you can say you want to go out for a walk or make a cup of tea or you've got writer's block. You've got to stand up and do it.

INTERVIEWER

Right then and there.

MORTIMER

Do it then and there! *And* provide a joke if necessary. It makes you able to think quickly.

INTERVIEWER

Are there ways in which work in the law is not helpful to the writer?

MORTIMER

In the law you can bore judges into submission, you know, by going on until they scream for mercy—whereas you can't bore your readers into submission!

INTERVIEWER

In the quotation that I mentioned earlier, you said that as

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a barrister and writer you felt "stretched between two opposite extremes," but you say you enjoyed the double life. Was this, then, a comfortable balance for you?

MORTIMER

Well, looking back on it, I probably did the barristering for too long. And I got too good at it for my own good. You know, I was too successful. And I think if I'd stopped it earlier I should have written more. But on the other hand, I don't regret it at all because without that career I wouldn't have written the things that I've written; I wouldn't know about the things that I do; I wouldn't have ever met a murderer. And you know, that seems a great privilege, to have met a few murderers in my life.

INTERVIEWER

You have said before that you handled the question of defending the person "who dunnit" by leaving the burden of deciding upon innocence or guilt to the judge and jury. You said, "The thing you, as the defending lawyer, are concentrating on is trying to convince the jury that guilt hasn't been proved beyond a reasonable doubt. Guilt isn't a question you have to decide, really, and you can get quite used to suspending your judgment about that, suspending your disbelief."

MORTIMER

That's right. Really, you're suspending your disbelief, which is what Catholics do all the time. So my belief remained hanging in the hall.

INTERVIEWER

Tell us, please, some anecdotes from courtroom life that were useful to you as a writer. I don't mean simply anecdotes that you have used in plotting Rumpole episodes, but rather, memorable moments that opened your eyes to character, language, and other aspects of writing.

MORTIMER

I learned a lot about literature divorcing people, because

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nothing equips you more for a life in letters than a career in the divorce court. I learned first of all a very important lesson about English dialogue. I learned the importance of the sporting metaphor in English life, and I remember very well the case in which I learned that. I was appearing for an admiral. And this admiral had a very unhappy married life because he'd fallen desperately in love with a skating instructress at the Queensway Baths. And this skating instructress was a beautiful little blonde lady who used to pirouette around on the ice in her little white tutu and her little white skating boots. My admiral sat on the corner of the ice rink and he fell *so* passionately in love with her that he skated across to embrace her. But he was so passionate that he forgot to remove the leather guards from his skates. So the admiral attended the conference in my chambers in a wheelchair. But in those days in divorce law you had to ask your client when he'd last made love to his wife. It was very embarrassing but you had to ask. And there was I, about a twenty-five-year-old divorce barrister, and I said, "Admiral, could you just tell me please—it's very embarrassing to have to ask you this—but when did you last make love to your wife?" It was then that I learned the importance of the sporting metaphor to the English. Because I'll never forget his reply. He said, "Well, we batted on for the first three years," he said, "but then we drew stumps." I also learned as a divorce lawyer the importance of learning when to end the dialogue, when to cut the scene. And I learned that when I was doing a rural divorce case. I can just give you a little passage from that case that will show you the importance of knowing when to stop. If I may just fill in the facts of the case, I had a client who was accused of committing adultery with a young girl in the middle of the Seven Acre Barley Field. And the only witness to this appalling act was Farmer Brown, who had been standing at the time at the edge of the Seven Acre Barley Field and had seen it all happen. And so I got up and I cross-examined Farmer Brown with my usual aplomb, and I said, "Farmer Brown, perhaps on some occasions during your younger years you might have taken a girl into the middle of the Seven Acre

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Barley Field." And he said "Ooh ah," or some such rustic reply. And I said, "You might even have sat down in the barley field next to this girl." And he said, "Ooh ah ah." And I said, "Perhaps you sat very close to her." He said, "Ooh ah." And I said, "Perhaps you kissed her." And he said, "Ooh ah." And I said, "Maybe you even laid down beside her, Farmer Brown." He said, "Ooh ah." And that was the point, for all students of English literature, for all students of law, at which any decent writer, any sensible barrister, would have cut the dialogue, sat down, ended the scene. But I had to ask the final, fatal question. "So, Farmer Brown," I said, "any witness standing on the edge of the Seven Acre Barley Field at that time might have come to the conclusion that you were committing adultery." "Ooh ah," he said, "and he'd be damn right, too." So it is desperately important to remember when enough is enough, when you've finished the scene.

INTERVIEWER

Have you anecdotes to share from your career in criminal law?

MORTIMER

I took to crime rather late in life. But I learned in all the courts many very, very important lessons about the English language. One of the most important lessons, of course, is that there isn't one English language; there are about a hundred English languages which are spoken on this island. And the language spoken by judges and the language spoken by clients are totally different. And by and large each is totally unable to understand the other at all. I used to end divorce cases and the judge used to give a most reasoned, brilliant little summary. But at the end of it all, the sort of fifty-year-old lady you represented had absolutely no idea whether she'd been condemned to death, or offered huge sums of damages, or been sent for long-term imprisonment. And when one had to explain that she was probably still married to the rather boring person to whom she had been married for the last fifty years,

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a sort of look of puzzled bewilderment used to come right onto her face. I never really got to the whole beauty of the difference between judgespeak and clientspeak until I went to the Old Bailey and I met a wonderful judge called Judge Maude. And I would like just for a moment to remember Judge Maude with you. This Old Bailey judge had a gorgeous profile; he had beautiful little gray sideburns; he wore exquisite little golden half-glasses; he used to adjourn the court at eleven-thirty every morning for his glass of cold chablis and a little nibble of cheese. And Judge Maude had the onerous duty of sentencing a totally drunk Irish laborer who had been rightly convicted of urinating down the stairs of Leicester Square tube station, indecent exposure, using indecent language, assaulting the police, everything you can think of! And Judge Maude looked over his beautiful little gold glasses and he said, "I am going to take a most unusual course, a most merciful course, with you my man." And this man said, "Oh, God bless Your Royal Highness for your charity." "I'm going to place you upon probation." And the man said, "Ah, Your Holiness, this is the most wonderful thing I've ever heard." The judge said, "But I place you on probation upon one condition, and one condition only." And the man said, "Oh, I'll do anything for Your Reverence, anything." The judge paused and said, "Well, the condition is that you must never touch another drop of alcohol for the rest of your natural life." And the man said, "Nothing. Absolutely nothing." And the judge paused and he said, "Look, by nothing, I mean *really* nothing. Not even the teeniest, weeniest little dry sherry before your dinner." So there *is* a sort of gap, a sort of language gap between the judges and the judged.

INTERVIEWER

What inspired you to try your hand at drama?

MORTIMER

I'd written about five or six novels and I found writing novels rather a lonely business. You very rarely actually catch anyone reading them. I've heard of a novelist who got onto the

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tube at Picadilly Circus for the purpose of getting out at Green Park, a distance of one stop. And as he got onto the tube he found himself sitting next to a girl who was in fact reading one of his novels. And he knew that two hundred pages further on there was a joke. So he sat on till Cockfosters, the end of the line, in the faint hope of hearing a laugh which never came. But somewhere after my fifth or sixth novel, I found it such a lonely occupation, and Nesta Pain, whom I knew and admired as one of the most distinguished of radio producers, asked me to write a play for the radio. At that time I considered myself a novelist, although it is true that during a lonely childhood I quite often acted out *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, duelling with myself and pretending I was mad for hours at a time.

INTERVIEWER

And, of course, you had the documentary film experience. In the introduction to the 1958 edition of *The Dock Brief*, you note that "documentary films bear as little relation to art as they do to life, existing uninterestingly between the two like the instructions you get with do-it-yourself garden furniture."

MORTIMER

Yes! Yes, so at first I procrastinated about writing a radio drama. But when I got the idea for *The Dock Brief*, I remembered Nesta's request. So I wrote the play. It was about an old barrister and an unsuccessful criminal in a cell, and by a wonderful stroke of luck the barrister was played by Michael Hordern, who later played in the television dramatization of *Paradise Postponed*.

INTERVIEWER

How extraordinary! He played the rector, Simeon Simcox, I believe.

MORTIMER

That's right. And there he is, on the cover of the paperback of *Paradise Postponed*, to this day. And with *The Dock Brief*, for the first time I actually heard dialogue that I'd written be-

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ing said by actors and I became intoxicated with the idea of that, and the idea of theater and the idea of dramatic scenes. And the writing of radio plays is a wonderful exercise because they entirely depend upon the imagination of the audience. *The Dock Brief* was rather successful for me. And if you are successful, if you write a play about two old men in a cell, the moguls of Hollywood immediately think you're absolutely the right man to write *The Decline and Fall of Genghis Khan*! So off I went to Hollywood from time to time and wrote for the movies. And so there I was, barristering, writing, doing all of these things.

INTERVIEWER

And you were heading a large family. How did you fit your writing in between working as a barrister and leading a busy family life? When did you find the time to write?

MORTIMER

It was very difficult. I used to get up very early in the morning, and when I became Queen's Counsel, a criminal lawyer, it was much easier because I would do a big case, then have a gap, then do another big case. And by the end I was only doing about five cases a year.

INTERVIEWER

Was it helpful having another novelist in the family? Did you provide support for one another in literary matters?

MORTIMER

No. I don't think writers being married to each other is very helpful.

INTERVIEWER

You can *both* sit home brewing tea, stumped for words.

MORTIMER

Or else you sit listening to the other person's typewriter rattling and it drives you mad. Also, you share common ex-

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periences, so you only have the same thing to write about. We did write a travel book together, *With Love and Lizards*.

INTERVIEWER

Did you feel a sense of competition?

MORTIMER

Yes. I think the problem was, Penelope used to type, so I could always hear the typewriter clacking, but I always write by hand.

INTERVIEWER

You must have had a number of literary friends. Was that a major part of your life, being involved with other writers?

MORTIMER

Not really. I think that English writers tend to avoid other writers. When I was young there were pubs you could go to and find other writers. And when I was at Oxford you could find Dylan Thomas at a pub, and Stephen Spender, and that was really exciting. That's all totally gone now. When I used to live with Penelope we knew a few writers. Now I see Peter Nichols and John Osborne, but not regularly. And we don't always talk about writing. I don't think the society of other writers is all that significant to my actual work in writing.

INTERVIEWER

To get back to a character whom you created both for the screen and the printed page, would you comment on the genesis of Horace Rumpole?

MORTIMER

Well, somewhere around the mid-seventies, about twelve years ago, I thought I needed a character to keep me alive in my old age and I remembered all of the rather underpaid barristers I'd known, trudging around some very unsympathetic courts, and I thought of my father's uniform, the sort of Winston Churchill set with the black jacket and striped trousers

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and cigar ash down the watch chain. And I thought of all the barristers I'd known who called the judges "Old Darling." So I thought of Rumpole, and he's been a great comfort to me. You might say he's taken me around the world.

INTERVIEWER

Are there ways in which Rumpole reflects the barrister, John Mortimer?

MORTIMER

Well, I mean, Rumpole says the things that I think. But if I say them, they sound rather sort of trendy and progressive; if he says them they sound rather crusty and conservative and nice.

INTERVIEWER

What about some of the other characters. "She-who-must-be-obeyed," for instance?

MORTIMER

"She-who-must-be-obeyed" isn't like anyone, really. You can put any scene that happens in marriage into the Rumpole marriage. My wife is not at all like "She-who-must-be-obeyed," but any scene that happens with my wife could be used in Rumpole.

INTERVIWER

You seem to have a particular sensitivity to and flair for portraying older, rather eccentric men, and bringing humor to their portraits.

MORTIMER

Oh, yes. Old men are my specialty, rather! And in my latest novel, *Summer's Lease*, I've had rather a good time with another older character; so I'm still at it, portraying old men.

INTERVIEWER

In working on your adaptation of *Brideshead Revisited* for

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television, you must have found the portrayal of Charles Ryder's father natural territory for your talent. It would seem that your own father and Ryder's were kindred spirits. It must have been delightful working on those scenes.

MORTIMER

Yes, absolutely. I mean the father character is very much like my father.

INTERVIEWER

The Oxford scene must also have seemed designed for you since you grew up near Oxford and went to university there.

MORTIMER

Well, I was in Oxford during the war, during the blitz, and the blackout, and rationing and a period of austerity. Although there were relics of the old Evelyn Waugh period, my Oxford was very different. I was very pleased to do *Brideshead*, which I remember reading at the time that it came out. In the forties everyone liked it because it took them away from the austerity, and it talked of a past, vanished age and wonderful golden youth and all that. And so it's popular now, when there's another age of austerity in Britain.

INTERVIEWER

What do you think accounts for its huge popularity in the U.S.?

MORTIMER

As to the popularity of it with the American audience, there's a letter from Evelyn Waugh saying he never thought that more than eight Americans would like *Brideshead*. And now they have Lord Sebastian look-alike contests in the streets of San Francisco! I'm not sure it hasn't done a terrible disservice to the world, with all of these young men being frightfully right-wing and carrying teddy bears!

INTERVIEWER

I don't believe you shared many values with Evelyn Waugh.

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Did this in any way cause difficulties for you in writing the adapation?

MORTIMER

Well, he was a great Catholic reactionary, and I'm a sort of an atheist and an inactive socialist. But on the whole I like the *book* and I love writing about religion. I mean I love writing about it, but I don't have any religion.

INTERVIEWER

Did you therefore find it difficult to identify with Charles Ryder's eventual religious awakening?

MORTIMER

No, I found that very easy. The difficulty I had with the character was his political stance, his behavior during the General Strike, which I could hardly bear to write about. And there's also a scene in which he takes Rex out to dinner, in which he feels terribly superior because Rex chooses the wrong sort of food and the wrong glass. This I find unbelievably snobbish. I don't mind his religion but I do mind his snobbery. And he's a difficult character because he's the most boring character in the whole thing—and all the other characters are so good.

INTERVIEWER

I read that the actor, Jeremy Irons, hesitated to take the part for this reason.

MORTIMER

Yes.

INTERVIEWER

But I'm so glad he did. His enunciation of the narrated sections—

MORTIMER

Was beautiful, just beautiful. Yes. But I did share with Eve-

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lyn Waugh the fact that both of our backgrounds are very middle-class. I mean, I went to Harrow and there met upper-class people. And Oxford was an extraordinary part of that English upper-class education. What happened was you went to a prep school or a public school in which your life was *incredibly* circumscribed. I mean, I never met a girl; I never met a member of the working class except the girl who came to make the bed, you know, in Harrow. One *really* lived in a sort of monastic, one-class world in which everything you did had rules attached. And then you suddenly got to Oxford and you were treated like a grown-up person—and you could even get drunk!

INTERVIEWER

Well, that's certainly similar to Ryder's experience! Your latest television series was adapted from your own novel *Paradise Postponed*. What inspired you to return to the novel after so many years?

MORTIMER

Well, about two or three years ago I went to defend an opposition MP in Singapore. So I flew out of England on Boxing Day to defend this man. I arrived jet-lagged, hung over, with no particular idea of what the case was all about. In short, I was in the usual position of a defending Queen's Counsel in the beginning of an important trial. And I staggered into the Singapore Central Court. There was this robing room, which looked to me exactly like every robing room from Snaresbrook to Bodmin to the Old Bailey to Hong Kong. It was a huge, dirty room with the floor lined with torn up newspaper. There were barristers lying on benches in their stocking feet, sleeping off their hangovers. There were other barristers ringing up their wives in the vain attempt to explain where they were the night before. And the whole of this familiar environment was presided over by an eighty-four-year-old Chinese woman who was making Nescafe and pouring out Chinese cough mixture for barristers with sore throats. And so I went into there and she looked at me and she said, "Ah, there you are. Lumpore

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of the Bailey." And I knew I didn't want to spend the rest of my life being called "Lumpore of the Bailey," so I decided to give it up, for the time at least. Then what happened was that I was having lunch with Bryan Cowgill, who heads Thames Television, and he said, "When are you going to write a story about England since the war?" At first I thought I didn't want to write a story about England since the war. And then I thought maybe I could. And then I thought, well, I'd adapted *Brideshead* for television and it's a long novel. I thought, "Well, I don't want to adapt anybody else's novel so *I'll* write a novel and then adapt it." So I wrote down the idea for it on a piece of paper in handwriting, and I never even typed it out. I sold it to the television company and to the publisher. I think they bought it and paid lots of money for it because they never could read the handwriting. So then I set about it and I wrote them both at the same time.

INTERVIEWER

The novel reads very much like a Victorian novel, with its episodic nature, its plot centering around a question of money and a debatable will. It calls to mind Wilkie Collins or Charles Dickens. Did you have the Victorian novel in mind when you began *Paradise Postponed*?

MORTIMER

I knew that I wanted to write a long novel, as much like a long Victorian novel as possible. I think that Victorian novelists and television writers have got a lot in common because, after all, they have a big audience and their work comes out in parts. I knew it had to have one strong plot which would keep people reading it from beginning to end. Immediately I thought of *Bleak House*. I thought, if you asked anybody what the plot to *Bleak House* was, they would never really be able to tell you, but they *would* be able to tell you all about the funny little things that happened along the way. But if *Bleak House* didn't have a central plot, they wouldn't have gone on reading it and discovered those things along the way.

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INTERVIEWER

The fact that *Paradise Postponed* revolves around the central mystery of the rector's will ties it in with your first novel, written almost four decades earlier. *Charade*, too, centered around a crucial mystery. In much of your longer fiction you've set out to resolve central questions in the plot as well as to discover the truth of character.

MORTIMER

The detective story comes, really, into everything, I think. And the detective story is hard, much harder to write, than a sensitive novel of adultery in Hampstead-on-Hill. Plots are terribly important. I think they *must* be important because I find them terribly difficult. Plots are the hardest thing for me. But you've *got* to have that plot in which you find out in the end, as you point out, the truth of the characters. And so the whole detective story reading is the important thing, to my mind. I think it's the hard thing and the important thing; it's the surprise, the suspense.

INTERVIEWER

Did you have your surprise all planned out when you embarked upon writing *Paradise Postponed*? Are you the sort of writer who has to know where everything is going before you start?

MORTIMER

No, not at all. No, I don't believe in that at all. I only know where everything is going about halfway through.

INTERVIEWER

Do you mean to say that while writing the beginning of *Paradise Postponed* you did not know that Charlie was the illegitimate daughter?

MORTIMER

Yes. I never have a plan. I know vaguely what's ahead but I never write any plan down because I think that unless the

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characters come to life and do it for themselves, you're lost. You know, that's the great thing: they've got to do their own living; they've got to be free to do what *they* feel they ought to do.

INTERVIEWER

That's fascinating. Many authors of fiction will say that they hope for the characters to take on lives of their own, but to add to that the dimension of the characters having an inward compulsion to behave in a certain way is rather different.

MORTIMER

Yes. I was reading E.M. Forster who was writing about plot, and he said the awful thing is you create these wonderful characters and then they won't do anything; they won't be bothered to get involved in a plot!

INTERVIEWER

Lazy characters! Was that in *Aspects of the Novel*?

MORTIMER

Yes, it was.

INTERVIEWER

So you see the characters through their own eyes. Did you find that any one character was more fun for you to write than the others?

MORTIMER

Not really. I mean some characters are nearer to me. You're always writing yourself in a novel. The author is always talking. Of course my strong point is old men. Simeon was easy for me because he was just sort of my father. But I enjoyed writing about Leslie Titmuss because he does appalling things. And Henry and Fred I thought of as two sides of my nature. Fred was the nice, decent, quiet, professional person and Henry was the show-off writer.

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INTERVIEWER

You are *far* more personable and likeable than Henry!

MORTIMER

I'm glad to hear it!

INTERVIEWER

In Simeon, here again you're writing about a character driven by religion.

MORTIMER

I don't know about Simeon's religion. The great thing about Simeon and Dorothy is that they don't want to be vulgar. There's a great key line when she says that she wants the working classes to rule the world but she doesn't want to have them to tea. And Simeon would think that the sort of conventional idea of heaven would be frightfully vulgar and a bit down-market. So we can't have that! Simeon is one of those people who probably mistakes Jesus for being the Labour Member of Parliament.

INTERVIEWER

But what about you? How do you, with atheistic views, understand the Simeon character?

MORTIMER

There are two things I think about. I mean, I find it very difficult to believe in God. But apart from that I would believe in everything else to do with the Christian religion. If you reject the idea of God, still the importance of the individual, and freedom, and all those traditions which are a part of Christianity are very valuable and we cannot throw them out.

INTERVIEWER

In discussing crime writing and the author's attitude toward death, P.D. James told me that she felt one could have doubts about some essentials of Christianity but still lead a religious life.

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MORTIMER

I think so, too. I just did an interview with Graham Greene. And his Catholicism is so near atheism that it's practically the same thing. There's a very good poem which he quoted that says you either have faith interspersed with doubt or doubt interspersed with faith.

INTERVIEWER

This sounds like a description of English weather! Sunny intervals with cloudy periods or—

MORTIMER

—cloudy intervals with sunny periods! That's right! Well, I have doubt interspersed with faith.

INTERVIEWER

In *Paradise Postponed*, you used doctors and the clergy as main characters. Did you do so in part because they would have access to an inside view of the community and because, somewhat like barristers, they minister to people's needs?

MORTIMER

Yes. Exactly. There's that, and also the fact that the British professional middle class is my territory. I was looking at the decline of those professional values which aren't to do with money. Whereas the Titmuss world or the whole Thatcher world is all to do with money—the only thing that matters is money. So I wanted to write about the professional middle classes whose idea is not to make money but to perform some kind of duty.

INTERVIEWER

Your female characters are also a particularly strong aspect of *Paradise Postponed*. Perhaps here they are more strongly portrayed than in any of your earlier work.

MORTIMER

I think the women in *Paradise Postponed* are stronger in a

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way than the men. Certainly Dorothy is stronger than Simeon. In my other work, in Rumpole, Hilda is stronger; Miss Phillida Trant is much stronger than her husband.

INTERVIEWER

Strong or not, most of the women in *Paradise Postponed*, along with some of the men, are ultimately frustrated with life. Can you comment on this?

MORTIMER

I think everybody is frustrated. Everybody fails himself in a way. The interesting thing about writing, to me, is the gap between what characters wish to be and the reality of what they become.

INTERVIEWER

And whether or not the characters can accept that reality.

MORTIMER

Yes. Or if they can't, what that produces! The women are brighter. They realize much more. And Agnes is incredibly strong. I think the women are much more realistic than the men. I think men really lead a much richer fantasy life than women.

INTERVIEWER

In *Paradise Postponed* you develop, more so than in some of your other work, a sense of place. There is more description of setting. Was this a challenge that you set for yourself in writing this novel?

MORTIMER

Yes. Places are important to me. I have to know *exactly* where the action goes on—but I don't like to spend too much time on being atmospheric.

INTERVIEWER

Descriptive writing, of course, would be one aspect used in

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the novel but not in the television version. How else was writing for the two media different?

MORTIMER

If you're writing for television you're always thinking of little scenes, whereas novels are all about the long flow of life, so to speak. I had to cure myself of writing like television in the novel. Television writing is all to do with scenes of two or three people in conversation at dramatic points in their lives. Most people's lives aren't great dramatic points. Most people's lives are what happens to them when they're sitting at the top of buses, lying in the bath, waiting for the doctor in surgery, thinking to themselves. That's what novels are. It was a great effort to get back into the way of writing a novel. I did it and now I can't think of anything I want to do more than write novels. And I've also published a book of interviews, my second book of interviews, called *In Character.*

INTERVIEWER

Earlier we were talking about *Paradise Postponed* as it related to Victorian literature. It also reminds me of the Victorian novel in the sense that individuals and their impact upon one another are regarded as essential. The individuals are regarded as significant.

MORTIMER

Yes, I'm glad you noticed that.

INTERVIEWER

A perfect example of this is the incident where the rector dresses up as Father Christmas in order to deliver the Christmas stocking to the sleeping child. And when Fred later asks him what was the point of dressing up if the child was likely to be asleep anyway, the rector replies, "I don't think it matters in the least whether she saw it or not. Even if she saw absolutely nothing, I have played my part." I thought that was wonderful.

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MORTIMER

Well, you're very kind. In a way, too, that incident is a metaphor for these progressive beliefs in human progress. It doesn't matter whether they're true or not; really, it doesn't matter that they'll never be achieved. What matters is that you do your best and defend those values, isn't it?

INTERVIEWER

And similarly, the whole question about the validity of the rector's will is also a question about these values, isn't it?

MORTIMER

That's right. Again it has a sort of symbolic, metaphorical application because the question is whether somebody who believed in an optimistic view of the future of mankind is a lunatic or not!

INTERVIEWER

Speaking of the future, are there new works that your readers can look forward to?

MORTIMER

Well, I've done a radio play entitled *Glasnost*, which is about three English writers in Moscow and people's attitudes toward Russia. People either fall in love with Russia, or they hate it. The middle classes love it, whereas the working classes tend to hate it. And I've written a new lot of Rumpoles called *Rumpole and the Age of Miracles*. These will eventually be televised. I am also working on a television script for *Summer's Lease* which will be done probably in four episodes.

INTERVIEWER

It would seem that you have accelerated your writing pace rather than slowing down over the years. You always seem to have a whole range of ideas for the future.

MORTIMER

Yes, and the other thing is that I'm about to start a novel

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using one of the *Paradise Postponed* characters, to be called *Titmuss Regained.*

INTERVIEWER

Really? This makes me think about the end of *Paradise Postponed* where several of the characters come to accept great disappointment in life. And yet at least for some there is a sense of a new beginning and new possibilities ahead. Are you yourself an optimist?

MORTIMER

About my own life? Yes. I mean if I weren't, I wouldn't have a four-year-old daughter, a girl called Rosamund. Yes, I'm optimistic. But I think, on the whole, pessimism is the best basis for a happy life.

INTERVIEWER

I like the way you say that while laughing, though!

MORTIMER

'Tis all a great cycle, isn't it? And you think everybody was different, that earlier generations were different, that your parents were different. Well, not at all. But I always think about my baby and how she's got to find out all about *The Magic Flute* and all those wonderful things. And it's all rather wonderful, really, isn't it?

—**Rosemary Herbert**

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Two Poems by Catherine Bowman

Twins of a Gazelle Which Feed Among the Lilies

Antlers butting against the full moon.
Bellies lolling on my belly.

Creamy chestnut crania in convex cones.
Dogs they follow me around in circles.

Everything I do they mimic. When I laugh they laugh,
when I cry they howl.
Fins breakwater, slice the waves that make up my body.

Galactopoietic forms that feed the Milky Way.
Hunchbacks girdled to the chest for life.

Interwoven compartments of lobules containing a network
of tubes.
Joined to the tubes of each lobe are ducts and all ducts lead
to the nipple.

Knots for tongues to untie.
Lazy-boy recliners for lips to sit on.

Mushroom explosions taped to the chest.
Naked reminders of the death cup cloud.

O mammilla O
Papilla.

Quivering wolf snouts nose through my dreams.
Rats on a whiskered basso-relievo.

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Sleep on your back they point to the stars.
Two points earned at birth. Nightpoints to stick to a
crying baby.

U × 2.
Vaulted cupola. Baldheaded misers hoarding the mammon.

Women lie topless, side by side on the beach, from A-flat to
C-sharp to 3-D.
Xylophones for the sun to play on.

Yes, to say, Yes
Zeugma. Zucchetto. Zoo.

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The Bed

I was five that summer, in our new house, with the light
aproning over the desert just before dark. That year I touched
the blue
pink skin of my cousin's baby rabbits in the smoky evening
smell
of El Paso lawns. And there's Hulia watching me, her head
positioned,
great and toothless, through the broken window; the first
big boney fish
star of the wrinkled sky. And there's my mother and
father's bed.

It was one of those standard, posture-correct, kingsize beds
preferred by newly married couples in the 60s along with
avocado light
fixtures, Tiki Torches and furniture store paintings of
Picassoesque fish
that glared over the matching carpet where I'd dance the
lovesick blues
with my Uncle Mitch. He'd play Hank Williams in the den
and then position
me on his boots, my face pressed against his jeans that smelled

like Coors and grease. Afterwards I'd rub my face clean in
the smell
of their vast sheets and pillows. Even now it's still the
biggest bed
I've ever seen. Like some kind of cloudy mountain it was
positioned
up against the wall, I think to hold the house up and maybe
even light
the block, bigger than all Christmas trees, Here's Johnny!
and the blue
sky. I'd peek over its ocean top of silver-threaded fish,

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climb up and then fall into the deep end where I knew they'd never fish
me out. There I'd tumble down and drown, alone in smells
of hair spray, linens, tobacco and love on Sunday afternoons in the bluish
swollen glow of their room. It was the first of eight beds
they would own together, always pointing north for the light,
Mother's side on the right, always near the bathroom in the same position.

One day playing in their bathroom I found some pictures of positions.
I asked my father and he laughed. *Nothing, just fish.*
Then he lifted the book of people-fish out of my hands into the light
brown dresser drawer that held the silver dollars, metal box and smelly
stuff. Later, lying in the farthest spot under the massive wingspan of the bed
I imagined myself a fish-woman with seaweed hair and fins that glittered blue.

If I had never seen those glossy magazines, how-to-books, or blue
movies I think I'd still slide into the positions
discovered in the caverns of our river bed.
First one stroke and then another, until we're swimming hyphenated, two fish
moving together in the dark, following a scent, a smell
that unfolds into our blood when we flip out the light.

And in the rippling blue afternoon when the sunlight
posits over us like a smell or a herd of masked fish
we rest and play in bed and learn to face night.

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Two Poems by Hayden Carruth

Absoluteness

Sometimes I think you are absolutely right. Your
rightness comes to me like the absoluteness
of God. I am vouchsafed the sudden glory
of your being, unequivocally, as if your body
were pure intelligence there confronting me
in naked indeterminacy in the afternoon.
Other times I think you're nuts. What are these
inflamed and torpid hieroglyphics coming
out of your mouth? Why don't you go away and
think it over? I meditate on this more or less
continuously as I look out across the broad and rolling
Stockbridge Valley, the farms there, the
remarkably individual fields in all their shapes,
all their colors, loam, hay, corn, alfalfa,
and the woodlots green or gray as the months
evolve before me. Permanence and change,
so evident in our lives, so mysterious, and still
so natural. You love me. I love you.

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Instructions

"After you croak what's to be done with what's left?"
you asked. And this, considering the disorderliness
of life, is by no means an unreasonable question;
I sympathize with you in your unease. My wives
would think they knew what to do, but you are not
my wife, your position will be anomalous; I can see
this, yes, I can see it behooves me to express my wishes.
Well, I have. Cremate me and flush my ashes down
the john in the ladies room of the Concord on Erie
Boulevard. I've told you, and I'm dead serious, eh?
But you have demurred, you have said this is not
possible, and you're right of course—how can I
ask you to do what you cannot? So strew my ashes
on the upper field of my place in Munnsville. Then
on the good-sized rough-hewn triangular rock
that lies near the lower northwestern corner
have a bronze crow mounted, just taking flight,
and have my initials and dates chiseled on the side
facing south. No more. That's enough. If anyone
should suggest these wishes be negligible
because written in verse, my dear, you'll know
what to say in response, namely, that's all he wrote.

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Bruce Murphy

Estuary, Sunday Evening

The man stands in his boat in his oilskins
On a stream in Rhode Island,
Casting across the pool wedged under his bow
And drawing in. A heron beats head-low
Across the shallows, neck pointing straight,
Too low to cast a shadow. The fisherman
Does not even look at the passing train.

Hard to describe. I am groping for something
Lying on the ground in the bottom of my mind.
That I glanced up from my work
At that particular moment? More than that.
The desire to be other things.
I see the angler cast, and my arm stiffens.
The blue heron slowly climbs.

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Sleepless

Ron Hansen

She walked her house by day, discovering it. She sat on the rough wooden staircase to the basement in order to look at the singing orange light of the gas water heater. She used a letter opener and stripped up a cattail of wallpaper in order to know how the front parlor was once when white folks occupied the room without speaking and sent their hard eyes down the newspaper and percolated their nasty opinions. She sashayed along the upstairs hallway, from the yellow sewing room past the second bedroom with the pretty girl things in it, the hidden clothes hamper that sent your dirty laundry down a tin drop to the washer and dryer, the pink, wallpapered bedroom that was hers and Claude's, and into the ugly turquoise bathroom with the iron eagle-claw tub and the bleary green view of the yard. She would peer into the spotted mirror over the sink but could only see herself. She would trail her own fingers along the fingerprinted walls but get no history from them. Her family had been moving into the old house for four days before she knew about the wickedness in it, but that was like hearsay or a butterfly of gossip that she overheard in the yellow room. She could make out seventy years of ordinariness

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downstairs, but it was like the upstairs had been soaped clean, like the evil memories had been painted over, the conversation interrupted.

Avis predicted a girl for a pregnant woman in Gretna, and that there would be no complications. She guessed, but didn't say, that the woman was twenty-eight or so; a Cancer; husband worked with his hands. Avis got a pledge of five dollars from her but knew she could forget about ever seeing it. Husband would say, "You *what*?" And that would be that. One of her weekly people complained that Avis had moved without giving him her new telephone number. She apologized but said she would have recommended his standing pat in the options market anyway. She wasn't getting great signals. Avis told a white woman in Papillion to get a second opinion before going ahead with the hip surgery. She'd come up with twenty for Avis, probably mail it in a card with pink begonias on the cover; say, "Your prophecies have helped so many!"

Claude phoned to get the numbers at noon but Avis could only come up with a zero and nine and her husband said maybe he'd skip the play. She got a crank call from the Nebraska chapter of the White Supremacists. A pregnant girl at Mercy High School wouldn't say why she was calling, only that she had a big problem and needed Mrs. Walker's advice. Avis suggested the girl say nothing to her parents just yet, that the problem was going to be ironed out in a week or two. The girl promised her a hundred dollars but Avis said, "You keep it, honey."

Her four-year-old scuttled in from the green screened porch, singing out that they'd got their first mail, and Avis opened the striped film processor's envelope in order to see the color prints she'd had made to promote herself: a jolly, overweight, sorta-pretty woman with cocoa-brown skin and lavender eyes and maybe an excess of jewelry. "You like me in these, Lorna?"

The little girl said yes.

Avis wasn't sure. She leaned on the pantry countertop and pored over each snapshot, but could only exclude the garden

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one with the jagged light along her neck. Her ten-year-old came in from the pantry room with a box of cups and saucers that were wrapped in tissue paper. Avis turned a slightly overglamorous photograph toward her older daughter and asked, "How you like this one, Priscilla?"

Priscilla cut through the box's strapping tape with a paring knife as she scowled at her mother's picture. "Give you the likeness of a fish."

Avis saw what she meant. "You sure are plainspoken."

She clipped out an Omaha *World-Herald* newspaper coupon and printed out the new classified ad she wanted inserted in the personals: "Hurt? Fearful? Wondering? PSYCHIC READINGS Madam Avis." She went to the kitchen telephone to read the new number strip and there was another call. She guessed it was from Bellevue. Offutt Air Force Base. White man saying, "You the psychic?"

Avis thought he was probably in his fifties, possibly a widower, sandpaper in his deep voice, nights misspent in a workingmen's bar, and sleeping with a girl many years younger. He ought to stop it. She said, "You want to hear my advice or your prospects?"

He coughed out a laugh and said, "You tell me."

Her secret impressions were that he hated his sick old lady, his son. Was trapped someway. Hated his job too. Could be an Air Force sergeant getting near retirement. She could see a green shirt. She could smell gasoline. Avis pressed the receiver between her ear and shoulder, put a notepad on the pantry countertop, shoved six bracelets up from her wrist. She said, "You know a lot about putting engines together. You want to open a shop?"

She could hear him light a cigarette. "Go on."

"I see some problems scraping up the money, you know? You're thinking about some insurance, you got a notion to take your cash out? Keep your money in there, you hear? And maybe you ought to get some more on-the-job experience before you jump into this." Avis was cartooning on the notepad, a boy with big eyes and hanging arms, his head angled over

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to the right. She said, "You can't jump into owning a motor repair shop with just your Air Force pension."

She was getting more certain as the guy sighed cigarette smoke away from his phone and said, "You still got my attention."

Avis covered her eyes with one palm and interpreted all she was picking up. "Okay. I am perceiving a whole lotta pain. Your wife, she's older, and she maybe had some bad operation in the hospital and stayed poorly from it? Also there is this sweet young girl coming into your house to sorta take care of your missus and clean up and so on. And you, you been creeping down to her room, *nightly*, saying please, Sugar, please please please, and just once more and such. You know what I'm talking about. A pretty young thing. She's a nurse? You ought to stop it. Evil things could happen."

"Hate to say it, but you're way off in left field."

Avis asked, "Has your wife passed away?"

"Nope. She's right here, sipping her java."

"Huh." Avis could see a dayroom and his urgent body and the girl's legs high and snugging him in. And she could see another room and a gray-haired woman asleep, or dying, purple flowers arranged all around her.

Her caller said she was right about the shop idea and the insurance policy, but then she'd gone off on a tangent.

"We don't usually mess up like this," Avis said.

"Know that," the sergeant said. "Wife had her palm read by you at that psychic fair in South Omaha. She got me to believing you were accurate as radar."

Avis said she was sorry and that she must have been picking up impressions from another person close by. She explained that it was simply like getting a couple of overlapping stations at one spot on a radio; or like when you snapped one picture on top of another and came up with a double exposure.

"Had days like that myself."

When he'd hung up, Avis peered at her notepad until she knew what was missing. And where the boy's head angled over to the right, she penciled in a rope and a noose.

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She was up late, sewing draperies and slipping the pink-tuliped chintz onto rods for Claude to put up in the morning. Everything was jumbled from moving in; nothing was in its place; even the twin bed in the sewing room was just iron springs on a pinewood frame. She stitched a drapery hem and snipped the thread at the machine's presser foot. She could hear Claude slowly and heavily tramping up the staircase and stopping to look in on the girls. Some time passed and then she heard him creak open the door to the sewing room and peer in without a word as she stooped over her plastic bobbin case. Without looking up, Avis said, "You awake, too?"

She could hear his slow pant but her husband was apparently just staring at her as she picked through spools of navy blue and black in search of a simple dark green. She asked, "How you like the pink?" but Claude said nothing.

Avis asked, "You okay?" and turned; but the sewing room door was by then touching shut. And then she saw a deep red paint abruptly spray over the wallpaper and haltingly trickle down and little by little disappear. And when she smelled the penny odor of blood, she knew she'd had an inspiration of evil in the past.

Avis placed the flat of a knife on a garlic clove and pounded it hard with her fist. She peeled away the dry husk and then chopped the pink garlic toe inside. The girls were at the dining room table, saying silly things and giggling as they drew with crayons on a split-open grocery sack.

Yard pictures in the windowpanes were warped and slurred by rain. Claude was sitting in his Parks and Recreation Department truck, waiting for the rain to pass, the radio probably tuned to a Royals game. Gray cigarette smoke tumbled against the windowglass. Claude tipped his cap down over his eyes and appeared to nap.

She could hear the girls arguing over the red crayon. The more Lorna yelled for it, the more Priscilla ignored her. Avis looked at the recipe and spooned oregano into the bowl, then she went into the dining room, drying her hands on a paper towel. Lorna was crying. Avis said, "Just give her the red, Priscilla."

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"She always hogs it!"

Avis asked Priscilla, "How long have *you* had it?"

"All day!" Lorna said.

Avis looked down at the big house her girls had crayoned on the grocery bag paper. One upper room contained the huge round heads and scarecrow bodies that meant human beings to Lorna. Priscilla was completing work on a sickroom. A yellow-haired boy was slashing an axe into a gray old woman who was hooked up to orange tubes and green hoses. Huge amounts of blood were springing from her belly in raindrops and petals of red.

"Yuck, Priscilla."

"Momma, it's a story."

"Whose story?"

Priscilla kept the red crayon in her lap as she worked on the yellow-haired boy.

"Are you listening, Priscilla? Who's the boy killing?"

Lorna looked at her sister's picture and said, "The momma!"

Avis crouched by her younger daughter and put a finger under the crude drawing of a girl who had brown sticks for legs. The girl's arms were joined around a white man with jackstrawed hair. "And who's this, Lorna?"

Lorna screwed up her face as she looked at the brown girl in the picture and then smiled with accomplishment as she said, "She the bitch!"

"How'd you hear that word, Lorna?"

Lorna squirmed a little.

"Priscilla?" Priscilla snickered and Avis said, "You want to get slapped, you keep it up."

Claude pushed open the yard door and stamped the rain off. Lorna jumped from her chair and leaped into her daddy's arms. He picked her up overhead and kissed her knees and let her drop to his belly. "K.C. got itself another win," Claude said.

Avis couldn't stop pressing. "How do you know the story, Priscilla?"

Priscilla wouldn't speak. She was as psychic as Avis, as skeptical as Claude. Her mother thought she'd lose her second sight pretty soon and happily accept being just ordinary.

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Claude sauntered around to look at the picture. "You *good*, babygirl! You got talent! You know she could draw like that, Avis?"

Avis asked, "How's the story come out?"

Priscilla peered out at the yard, then glanced at her picture again and said, "The girl gets killed."

"You get pictures in your head?"

"Sorta."

"She get killed by the person called her a bitch?"

Priscilla didn't say.

"Who kills her?"

Claude whispered into Lorna's ear, "Your momma and sista makin their spook talk again." The telephone was ringing so he carried his little girl into the pantry room to get it.

Avis tilted up Priscilla's chin and squinted into the girl's angry eyes. "Who kills her?"

"The boy."

"A boy you know?"

The girl jerked her chin away. "You're *pestering* me!"

Claude stood in the doorway with Lorna. "Telephone must be for you. Won't speak to me."

Avis said, "How do you know the story, Priscilla?"

"I don't *know* how I know! I just *do*!"

Avis hugged the girl and angled her head low enough to smell her slightly dirty hair. She said, "I know, sweetheart. I know." And then she went to the telephone.

"I can't sleep."

"And you are?"

"I'll try but I keep getting scared."

His speech was pokey, like he was sickly or a little simple; gloom or ignorance in his voice; a sulky white boy in some Omaha high school. His problem would wind up being about a pretty girl who liked him less than spit.

"Could you give me your name?"

"Gary."

Sixteen; probably skinny, poor, obnoxious. She could hear him playing with the phone cord and then there was an overlong pause.

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Avis said, "I like your name."

Gary didn't say anything.

"Has this been going on long, Honey?"

Gary gave it some thought and said, "Twelve years."

"You got to be lying. You're too young."

The boy seemed irked and scared. His right hand was possibly squeezed between his thighs, tendering himself. He said, "Each night it's the same."

"Well, upsetting dreams do repeat themselves."

"I'll be standing outside this big house and then I'll be standing inside it. And I walk into the rooms."

"And why is that scary?"

The sleepless boy didn't speak.

Avis said, "Just tell me what you see."

"Just the rooms and some people."

"You mean people you know?"

He didn't say.

"How do they react to you?"

"Afraid."

"And why is that?"

She heard nothing.

"Hello?"

Priscilla was in an apron and cranking an opener around a can of tomato paste. She asked, "Is he still on the phone?"

"Are you there?"

Gary sighed. "I just wish I could sleep."

"I know." She got an insight and jotted "Willa" on the notepad.

"Could you help me sleep?"

"I'll try."

Priscilla tipped the can and spooned the tomato paste into a bowl, redly spattering her apron. Gary asked, "Is she your daughter?" and then, as if he'd overstepped, Gary hung up the phone.

Avis attempted to get a promotional interview at an Omaha weekly newspaper and was introduced to a Scorpio named Ed who admitted to writing "hash and thumbsucker pieces" that

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he could probably fit her story into. She could smell his prejudice like onions as his gluey eyes skirted away from hers and gray cigarette ash dripped onto his notebook. She heard herself saying she could predict a baby's sex from the mother's skin temperature. She said she got a sick feeling whenever she walked into a house with a ouija board. She said auras were usually pineapple colored, but she'd seen purple and black and even rainbows. She said a psychic was someone who saw the world just like an educated person could see the word "dear," say, in "read." She said she'd get herself into an altered state between consciousness and sleep and house ghosts and spirits would grayly appear in the corner of her eye.

"And you talk to them?"

"Yes."

"In English?"

She didn't say.

Ed showed his tan teeth in a skeptical smile. "I take it then you're sort of a spook psychiatrist."

Avis said, "I try to route them toward the God-spirit to seek peace and love."

"You ever get laughed at when you say that?"

She scowled as she said, "I have been brought to test by ugliness of all kinds."

Ed jotted down the word "ugliness" and then cagily thought for a second or two, tapping his gray lips with his pen. "And how would you describe this 'God-spirit'?"

She said, "The Holy Trinity of the Father, Son, and Comforter, in addition to the twelve high spirits that help govern the universe."

Ed hurriedly scratched his pen across his notepad and shook his head in rich amusement. "Avis, you're almost too good to be true."

She took the 30th Street bus to Ames and walked up Larimore Avenue with groceries from the Safeway, getting winded as the street tilted up. She saw curtains part as scornful widows frowned out at her. She was being watched by the old Austrian just east of her place as he weakly scratched a garden rake

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across his bluegrass lawn. Everyone white on the block was sickly and old and scared about how much they could get for their properties now that the coloreds were moving in. Four homes were just recently for sale. Her own house was white, two stories high, with a green screened porch and a great sick elm in the yard, and halfway up the slope of Larimore, at exactly the spot where boys had to stand hard on their bicycle pedals in order to try the hill. Avis couldn't go another step with her heavy groceries so she put the sack on the brick sidewalk and angled across the yard until she got the sense she was being stared at from her own house. Her eyes went upstairs to the sewing room and to a joyless girl of about eighteen whom Avis had never seen before, sitting there at the windowsill with her jaw in her brown right hand. And then as though she'd been ordered elsewhere, the girl turned aside and slowly withdrew, anxiously tying her yellow nightgown's strings over significant breasts. Avis hurriedly got out her house key and rushed up the green steps but the brass key kept scratching away from the doorlock and she had to hold it in two hands to jab it home. And by then Priscilla was yanking the door open and greeting Avis in an overlarge yellow nightgown that she got from her mother's closet.

"Were you upstairs?" Avis asked, and the girl said yes; she'd been sick.

"You know why you're wearing my nightgown?" Avis asked, and Priscilla considered herself with the surprise of a sleepwalker who had acted out a role she didn't understand.

Avis couldn't sleep so she went down to the front parlor to work. She paperclipped a snapshot to her press release and slipped in a note about her willingness to appear on programs without fee, and then she printed the addresses of the Omaha television and radio stations on manila envelopes. Cold air passed over her and she got up to close the kitchen door. And then she had a premonition. She looked into the pantry room and just then the telephone rang.

She picked up the receiver and Gary was already speaking. "A great big white house and green trees. And it isn't night,

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it's day, but there's weather. And I'm on the sidewalk looking to an upstairs window at some woman in an overcoat, she's a doctor I think, and she's moving the window drapes aside. And then I'm inside the house on the upper floor. I know the people there."

"Are they your family?"

"She passed away."

"Your mother?"

"She was in a lot of pain. And she passed away and it was easier for her."

"Is it your mother you see?"

Quiet. She could practically see him. His green eyes were squinched up, stopping his tears; his open mouth was twisted with pain. She skipped ahead by asking, "How about your father?"

Gary said, "Dad was just coming in from his night shift."

"Was?"

"You know; night shift; overtime?"

"Just then you talked like you weren't dreaming."

Gary didn't say anything.

"And then what happens?"

Gary said bitterly, "As if you really wanted to hear."

"Only if this is helping."

He sighed and said, "Another room and this colored girl is sleeping in a nightgown. No. She's not sleeping; she's pretending to sleep. Her back is to me. And I lie down next to her and she's hot for it. She knows what she wants and so do I. And one thing leads to another and I'm touching her and then she spoils it. She speaks. Her speaking is how I wake up."

"You recognize her?"

"She's not who she was before. She's changed. She says angry things."

"Angry things?"

He gave that some thought before saying, "I mean things that make me angry."

"You keep calling it a nightmare."

"Uh huh."

"How come you're scared?"

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He paused before replying. "It's how I look when I get up from the bed, the bed where the girl was sleeping. My jeans and shirt are soaking with blood. You can hear it dripping onto my shoes, and there's a pool of blood on the carpet. And I've got an axe in my hand."

"Have you hurt somebody?" Avis asked.

"How do you mean?"

"Is this a nightmare or are you telling me something you've done?"

"A nightmare."

"You're sure you know the difference?"

He didn't answer.

"You said she speaks, the sleeping woman. Could you tell me what she says?"

"Don't know." She could hear him becoming more passive, pitying himself.

"Here's something you can try, Gary. Next time you get your nightmare, just look at your hand. You right-handed?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Look at your right hand. You'll get power over your nightmare. You'll get rid of those people and you'll sleep. Could you try that?"

Gary wasn't paying attention. She could imagine his green eyes wildly straying as he said, "I could try a lot of things, with you."

She sighed and said, "You're getting into trash talk now."

"You think you could handle it?"

"Just be yourself, Gary."

She could hear nothing for such a long time that she finally said, "Are you there?"

Then she had an overpowering feeling that she wasn't alone downstairs, that his sleeplessness was phony, his night call a trick, that she was only being set up for harassment or rape and that a white boy who called himself Gary was creeping toward her even then. She heard his footsteps on the dining room carpet, heard the soft bump and rasp of a wooden chair being slightly brushed by his jeans. But she was too frightened to turn. Her skin prickled and her heart trip-hammered. She

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smelled Old Spice cologne, and then she heard Gary say over the phone, "The girl in bed? She's you."

Avis hung up the telephone. She spun around and the room was empty. Even the Old Spice fragrance was gone. The telephone began ringing again and she wept until it stopped.

She told Claude about the call as he sipped his coffee. Avis scrambled eggs for him in a measuring cup and the eggs sputtered when she poured them into the skillet. Claude said, "Could be a prank, you know. Could be white people want us outa here. Niggers movin in, wreckin the neighborhood."

"Isn't just the phone calls, Claude."

"Except you been havin days you seen right and days you seen wrong. You ain't at a hunnert percent yet. You could be messin up."

Avis told a Creighton University professor to spend more time around water, but to look out for a Pisces who was intent on injuring his reputation. A Fremont woman said she wanted to give up smoking, but Avis said the problem wasn't cigarettes, it was her marriage. And she was bullying her husband. She got a call from a talk show host, saying he'd like Avis to join him next month on his "Coffee Break" radio program. She tuned in the program the next morning in order to get some practice with her likely replies and heard a woman say one of the problems of science research was that you changed experiments by observing them. She said whatever is perceived is altered in some way.

In late September the telephone would ring six or more times per day and no one would speak when Claude or Lorna said hello. Avis presumed that was Gary. She got in touch with the Nebraska State Department of Corrections, but an uppity secretary said she couldn't talk about ex-prisoners to just anybody who happened to call.

She once woke up and Claude wasn't Claude but a crazy man lying on a dirty bed, his skin very pale, his haunted eyes wide open, his mechanic's hands clamped over his ears in order

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to stop the slow tramping noise of heavy footsteps on the stairway. Like he was again hearing a ghost that he heard every night in the house. She thought he'd killed himself with a quart of whisky. Years and years ago. "Who *are* you?" she said, but then the door opened, the man's apparition disappeared, and her husband walked inside in his pajamas. "Went for a waterglass," Claude said.

One evening when she was getting out of her slip, Avis looked at the pink flowers on the chintz draperies and imagined a great mahogany bed angled under the high window. She could see a gray-haired woman asleep, with a purple tube up her nose and her hands greenly wormed with veins. Avis could hear an oxygen tank lightly hissing as a mechanic in green coveralls knocked sneakily at the sewing room door, sandpaper in his voice as he harshly whispered, "Willa!"

Avis went up to the girls' room at ten P.M. and gently tugged Lorna's right thumb from her mouth. She walked over to the twin bed alongside the wall, but Priscilla was sitting up in her nightgown, her right elbow on the windowsill and her jaw in her hand, solemnly contemplating the yard as if a companion were outside and she were trying to interpret words that were not being said aloud. Avis rapped sharply on the windowglass and Priscilla's dark eyes jumped with shock before she simpered and said, "Hi, Momma."

"What you up to?"

"I just couldn't sleep."

Avis touched a curtain aside and gazed down. No one was there. "You playing me for a fool?"

Priscilla hopped up into her bed and snickered as she covered her face with a pillow.

She'd given Claude some numbers and he'd used them on the greyhounds in Sioux City, winning four-hundred sixty dollars on a quinella. He called Avis about it from the Fontenelle Park golf course where they were laying in irrigation pipe. Claude said his supervisor might just let him off early

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so he could bring home a big celebration. Then he said his cheeseburger was on the hotplate and he kissed the mouthpiece and said goodbye.

Avis heard the clank of the mailbox lid. She went out and collected two bills, a letter from a cancer patient in Soldier, Iowa, and a fingerprinted envelope from the reporter at the Omaha weekly newspaper. She sat down on the porch steps and took out some grayed newspaper photographs. The wording had been jaggedly torn away from the pictures but she could make out what looked like "mercy killing" below a snapshot of a big mahogany bed and a woman's body arranged beneath a darkly-stained sheet. Another newspaper picture had been taken from a high school yearbook—a boy with yellow hair in an ugly paisley shirt, his hard eyes too close to an overlong nose. She thought, Who's the ferret? And then knew. Gary. Ed had also included a crime magazine photograph of a black nurse hacked apart with an axe. Written over the picture was: "Your household haints, I spose."

She tried to nap on the sofa in the parlor, but couldn't sleep for the visions of Gary twelve years ago. She got up and paid her bills, cleaned up the parlor, then emptied the wastepaper baskets into a green plastic bag and dragged it out to the garbage cans in the cinder alley. The day had lost twenty degrees since noon and indigo rainclouds were moving in.

She thought, Everything's changed. She walked to the stoop and peered through the windowpanes of her kitchen door. Aprons and sweaters were hanging from nails and green rubber boots made tan by yard mud had been slung into a corner. A twelve-year old Knights of Columbus calendar was tacked up in the pantry, and hooked over the top of the inner door was a rubber-tipped cane.

Avis called, "Hello?" She paused a second before stepping inside. She walked into the kitchen and called again, "Hello?" She could see the pecan pie she'd made on the stovetop and Lorna's storybooks by the telephone, but she could also make out a rickety table with a checkered plastic tablecloth and on

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it salt and pepper cellars and a soup bowl of truck-stop matchbooks. She opened cabinets and found her own soups and stews and cereal boxes, but also an ill-matched assortment of cups and plates, potato chips, beef jerky, whiskies, antacids, cough syrups, and a huge variety of pills. In the parlor, she bumped against her own purple sofa but only saw a heap of magazines and a frayed green chair no more than two feet away from a round-tube Zenith television. Unwashed clothing was on the sofa, a mechanic's green coveralls were on the floor, a motor was in pieces on an open newspaper.

She was getting overlapping stations at one spot on the radio. She was apparently picking up impressions from another person close by.

She went upstairs with apprehension, even panic, but also with the concern of a physician. She could see photographs stair-stepped up the wall: of a young sailor in Navy whites standing with a testy-looking older woman in a tulle wedding dress; a baby boy in cowboy boots in the yard with a 1956 Plymouth; the boy in a blue Cub Scout uniform; and Gary now fourteen years old, at Christmastime, getting a shotgun from his father. And at the top of the stairs was Willa—not a snapshot but an apparition, a girl acting out scenes from the past. Willa just stepped out of the bathtub and prettily reaching up for a towel in the hallway closet. And Willa in a terry-cloth robe, carrying a food tray, smiling at someone Avis couldn't see. And yet again Willa in her nurse's whites, standing up against the clothes hamper and shutting her eyes in pleasure as she offered her breasts to Gary's father. Engine grease from his night shift was under his fingernails. Avis could smell gasoline on his coveralls. And then the hallway was empty.

Avis saw a strip of light beneath the closed door to her bedroom. She put her palms to the door and perceived inside a great mahogany bed underneath the high window, an oxygen tank in the corner, a gray-haired woman sinking into a heap of yellowed pillows under stained patchwork quilts as an orange rubber tube drained into a saucepan. When Avis opened

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the door, his mother's head lolled fragilely to the right and she gazed at Avis for many seconds before saying weakly, "Gary?"

Avis shut the door and walked down the hallway to the second bedroom. Her girls' room; now a boy's. His orange windowshades were down, rumpled airplane sheets were on the bed, jeans were hanging over a chair, atop a small study desk were a black telephone, high school geometry and physics textbooks, a German beer stein of pencils and pens, and a green rubber dinosaur.

She withdrew to the only other upstairs room. Her sewing room. Willa's room. Her own mattress had been rolled up in the corner, but Willa's mattress was on the iron springs of a pinewood cot just like her own. Except for hangers covered in tissue paper, Avis's closet was empty, but Willa's was deep in nurse's whites and party clothes and seven pairs of shoes. A striped rug was oddly placed on the floorboards to cover up the pink stain of dropped fingernail polish.

Avis was surprised at how little else she could pick up in the room; how there was only a teaspoon of history in it; it was like trying to read the print on a book trapped in a block of ice. She peered out the upstairs window as she slipped her heavy overcoat off and sat on her own spare bed. She then slumped over on the iron springs with her right palm tightly clamped to her eyes so she could put all the scenes and pictures together.

Rain pattered against the windowglass and gradually increased in power until it was as hard and gray and vertical as upright piano wire. Avis heard the porch door open and seconds passed and then the porch door closed again. She yelled down, "Priscilla?" and then she heard a heavy tramping up the steps. In her mind's eye she saw that night twelve years ago: in the big walk-in closet where her girls' pretty things were now, she saw Gary sagged among his jeans and paisley shirts and calf-high motorcycle boots, a pop-eyed boy with a pink tongue strangled out of his mouth, his head jutted to the right by a towrope and noose.

She could hear him opening his mother's bedroom door

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and seconds passed and Gary repeated her killing, his right hand raising up high overhead and slashing down, his left palm up to shield his eyes from the hot spray of blood. Gary was probably hearing over and over again the hard squelching slugs of the axe and his mother's dying groans of pain, but Avis only heard stillness, and then she heard the boy open the second bedroom door and yank the towrope down from his tie rack, and then, with an angry second thought, Gary shut that door too.

Hairs stood up on her arms and neck and goosebumps pebbled her skin, but Avis stayed as she was. His footsteps approached the yellow sewing room, Willa's room, and as the door creaked open the penny odor of blood and the sink upsurge of corruption were so overpowering that Avis pinched her nose, but she couldn't move in spite of her understanding of what his sleeplessness was and what Gary had meant by being in prison. The iron springs dipped with Gary's added weight and the springs rang a little as the boy rolled into her and nudged his hard sex between her thighs. His hand painted her skin red with blood as Gary gingerly touched her cheek and petted back her hair and said "Willa!" raspily, just as his father did. And Avis at last found the voice to say, "It's time to go to sleep, Gary."

The boy paused and then avidly pressed his lips to her ear in a kiss that was cold as an apple slice. He placed his heavy axe on top of her hip and Avis could feel its sharp pressure through her skirt as the boy's hand sought her breast. And she could feel his crazy hate and jealousy as Gary again pushed into her, saying, "You want it and you know it."

Avis took his hand in a motherly way and said, "Gary, please. Don't hate anymore. Give up. Go to sleep. You're a ghost."

And then she could feel a slight change in him, and Gary was lying on his back, acknowledging her words. She turned and Gary was just a sickly boy in a paisley shirt, his green eyes windowpaned with tears. Avis said, "Everybody's forgotten," and she heard the iron springs ease up as his nightmare slowly ended and, at last, Gary slept.

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

FICTION

William S. Burroughs is the author of *Junky*, *Naked Lunch*, *The Place of Dead Roads*, *Cities of the Red Night*, *The Western Lands* and many other works. In February, Viking will publish Burroughs's *Interzone*, a collection of manuscripts from the years prior to the publication of *Naked Lunch*, many of which were discovered in 1984 among Allen Ginsberg's papers. The book will include "Twilight's Last Gleamings," which, editor James Grauerholz has said, "is often cited as Burroughs's first attempt at writing; it was written in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1938, with the collaboration of his childhood friend Kells Elvins. The manuscript does not appear to be the original but a reconstruction from memory at some later point, when Burroughs was using a typewriter with the Spanish inverted exclamation point, hence probably in Tangier [between the years 1953–1958]. The author has written that the piece was inspired by the sinking of the ship the *Morro Castle*, in 1935, and this rollicking, exploding fantasy pointed the way toward his eventual literary destination. Much shorter versions of it have appeared throughout his writings, most notably in *Nova Express* (Grove, 1964); this is the fullest version yet published."

Ron Hansen is the author of two novels, *Desperadoes* and *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*. His collection of short stories, *Nebraska*, will be published in January by Atlantic Monthly Press.

Susan Minot is the author of *Monkeys*. "The Man Who Would Not Go Away" will be included in *Lust*, a collection of stories to be published in 1989 by Seymour Lawrence/Houghton Mifflin.

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Hiram Moody's work has appeared in *The Antioch Review*, *Grand Street* and elsewhere. He lives in Hoboken, New Jersey, and is at work on a novel.

POETRY

Thomas Bolt was born in Washington, D.C., and was graduated from the University of Virginia in 1982. His book, *Out of the Woods*, will be published this year by Yale University Press as volume 84 of the Yale Series of Younger Poets. He writes art criticism, most recently for *Arts Magazine*, and lives in New York City, where he has exhibited paintings.

Catherine Bowman's poems have appeared in *Kingfisher*, *River Styx*, and *Webster Review*. She is a recent graduate of Columbia University's MFA Writing Program.

Hayden Carruth's two most recent books, both published in 1986, are *The Selected Poetry of Hayden Carruth* (Macmillan) and *Sitting In* (University of Iowa Press). A new book, *Sonnets*, will be published this year in a limited edition put out by The Press of Appletree Alley. He teaches in the graduate creative writing program at Syracuse University.

Clayton Eshleman's poem in this issue is from *Hotel Cro-Magnon*, to be published in the spring of 1989 by Black Sparrow Press. His recently published works are *Antiphonal Swing; Selected Prose 1962-1987* (McPherson & Company) and *Conductors of the Pit: Works by Rimbaud, Vallejo, Cesaire, Artaud, and Holan* (Paragon House). Eshleman teaches at Eastern Michigan University, where he edits *Sulfur* magazine.

Arthur Gold is a professor of English at Wellesley College. "1944" belongs to a collection—about to be published privately—called *Poems Written During a Period of Sickness.*

Jane Hirshfield's second collection, *Of Gravity & Angels*, was published in 1988 by Wesleyan University Press. She is the co-translator of *The Ink Dark Moon: Poems by Komachi and Shikibu, Women of the Ancient Court of Japan* (Scribner's), and she has received a Guggenheim Fellowship in poetry, a Columbia University Translation Center Award and other honors.

Harry Mathews's most recent novel is *Cigarettes* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1987). He is also the author of two collections of short fiction, *Selected Declarations of Dependence* with Alex Katz and *Country Cooking*, as well as several volumes of poetry. Mathews lives in Paris and New York City.

Bruce Murphy is a graduate student in English at New York University. He is a recipient of the Bowdoin Prize and an Academy of American Poets Prize.

Joyce Carol Oates is the author of many books, most recently *(Woman) Writer: Occasions & Opportunities* (Dutton) and *The Assignation*, a collection of short stories (Ecco).

B. A. St. Andrews, whose work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Georgia Review*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *Carolina Quarterly*, *The Hu-*

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manist, *Commonweal* and elsewhere, is an associate professor of humanities and English at a medical university in Syracuse, New York.

Charles Simic's thirteenth book of poems, *The World Doesn't End*, will be published in the spring of 1989.

C. D. Wright's most recent collection is *Further Adventures With You* (Carnegie Mellon, 1986). She won the 1986 Witter Bynner Prize for Poetry from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, and in 1987 received fellowships from the Bunting Institute and the Guggenheim Foundation. With Forrest Gander she co-edits Lost Roads Publications, a book press.

INTERVIEWS

Shusha Guppy is the London Editor of *The Paris Review*, and a regular contributor to the *Daily Telegraph*, British *Vogue*, and other periodicals. *The Blindfold Horse*, an autobiographical work, will be published by Beacon Press in 1989.

Rosemary Herbert is a writer and photographer. She has written for the *New York Times* and numerous other publications, and for BBC Radio in London. She is at work on a mystery novel, as well as a volume of interviews with mystery-novel authors.

ART

Robert Gober was born in Wallingford, Connecticut, in 1954 and lives in New York. His work has been exhibited recently at the Art Institute of Chicago, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, The Saatchi Collection, London, and Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.

Eva Hesse was born in Hamburg in 1936, and died in New York in 1970. Her drawings and sculpture have been exhibited internationally, including retrospective exhibitions at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Whitechapel Gallery, London, at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, and Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

Cary Smith was born in Puerto Rico in 1955, and lives in Hartford, Connecticut. His paintings have been exhibited recently at White Columns, New York, and Koury Wingate Gallery, New York.

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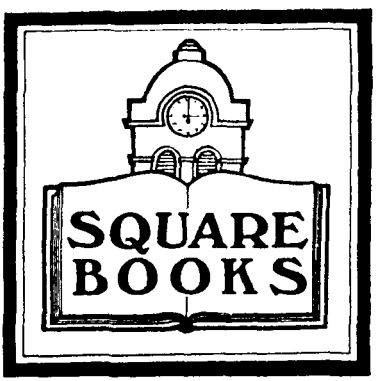

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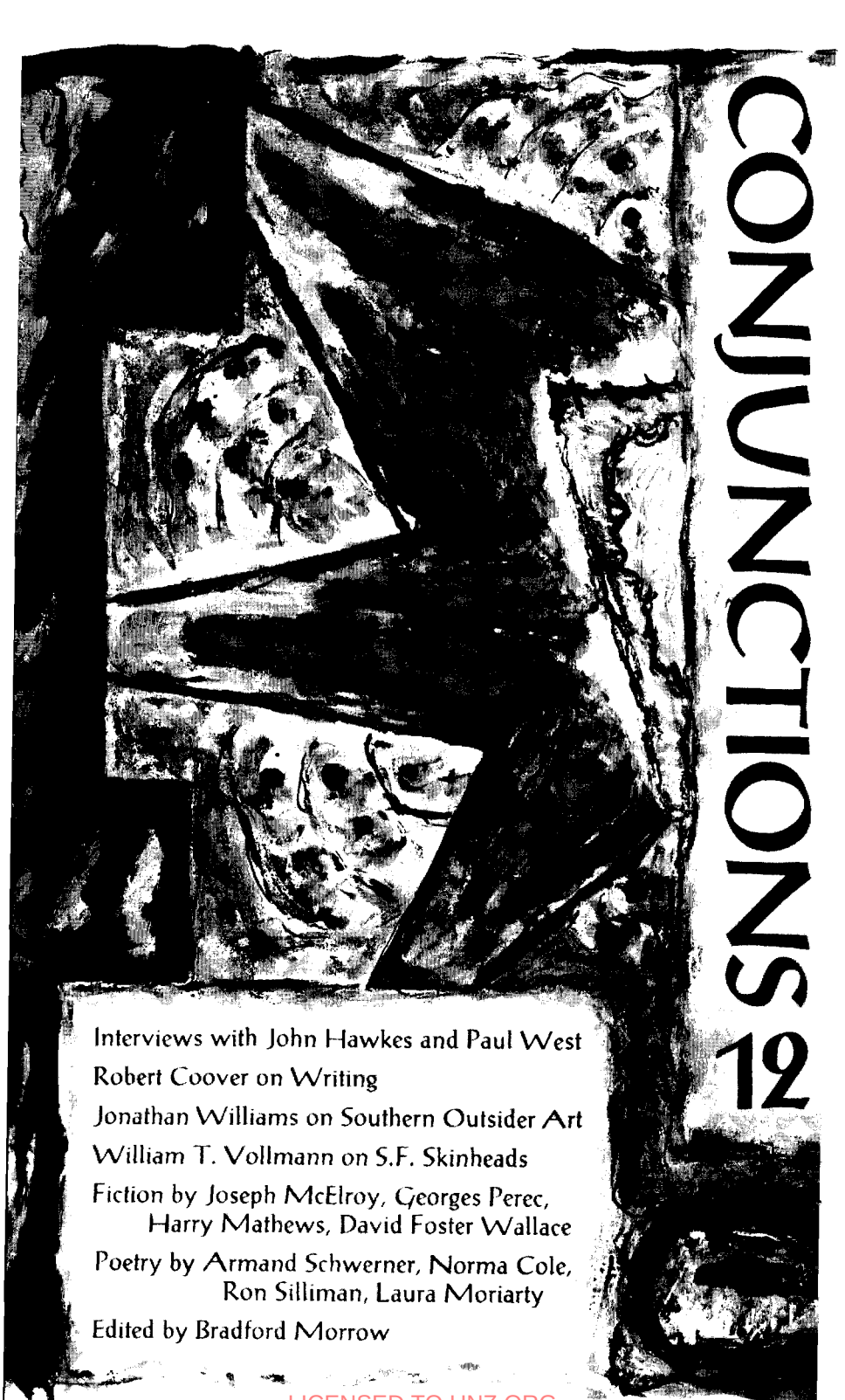

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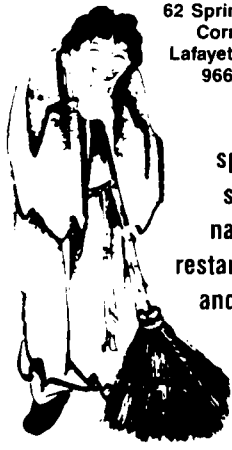

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—Dallas Wiebe, "Night Flight to Stockholm," Issue 73

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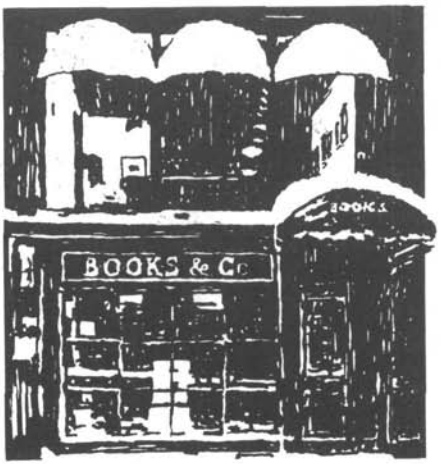

"The one way of tolerating existence is to lose oneself in literature as in a perpetual orgy."

—Gustave Flaubert,
in a letter, 1858

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